This Side of Paradise

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This Side of Paradise

by arkastadt

Summary

Nakahara Chuuya has his reasons for not wanting to fall in love again anytime soon, especially during his au pair year in Yokohama. His host brother, Dazai Osamu, plans to change that.

Translation into Russian available on Ficbook

Notes

1. I'm finally getting around to posting this baby to ao3! If you follow me on twitter, you may have already seen this. If not, then cool. It's about 73% finished on there, so if you're really, really curious you can read it there. This version, however, will be more polished, with less typos, and with an extended plot, soooo!

2. I'll update every Sunday. And sometimes on Wednesdays if my brain works lol

3. Tags are there for the entire story, but depending on what happens in the 27% part that hasn't been written yet, I will update them with time. I'll also add more detailed warnings in the A/Ns!

4. The fic has a playlist!

5. Have fun reading! I hope you guys will like it :)

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1: The Other Side

Chuuya knew the Tsushima's were a wealthy family — their info that was mailed to him, once they were matched, said as much, and he did his own research — but he never expected them to have a personal chauffeur that drives them around in a sleek black BMW m4 coupe.

Wow.

Just wow.

"— and oh dear, I'm rambling! Feel free to stop me anytime. Do you have any questions so far, Chuuya-kun?"

"Uh," Chuuya scratches the back of his head with a dopey grin as he looks at the woman. Fumiko Hayashi. Thirty-six years old. A fitness coach, wife, mother, talkative oddball from what he's gathered so far, and one of his hosts for the next twelve months. "To be honest, I'm still trying to process everything *and I'm* a bit jet-lagged, so..."

Hayashi offers him a warm smile. "Of course. You can take a nap once we're home, relax, meet the kids."

The mention of kids makes his stomach flutter.

Considering he's taking part in a freaking au pair program, it's a little too late to start worrying about dealing with kids. It's more complicated than that, though! Chuuya made the decision to go to Japan on a whim in his last year of school, and *yeah*, he had never been downright terrible with kids, and *yeah*, he used to tutor one or two to get some extra money, but he's also never been a natural talent with them. So maybe, he's a tiny bit nervous that this is one huge mistake. Sue him.

"How are they?" Chuuya asks, and instantly feels stupid for asking. "I mean," he tries again with a wince, "I obviously read what you told me, but I'm sure there's so much more about Ryuu and Gin than in mails. I just want to be prepared."

"Don't worry, you'll love them," Hayashi says, waving her hand. "They're quiet, reserved, but they're sweethearts. To be frank, we weren't looking for an au pair because of lack of time, but because I feel like they need a friend. Someone like an older sibling, you know?"

Chuuya tilts his head. He's pretty sure they do have an older sibling. Dazai Osamu, the info said — the mails barely mentioned him, but Chuuya remembers being relieved he'd have, at least, someone around his age.

Oh well.

Maybe Dazai has already moved out?

He decides not to bring it up.

They talk some more about the kids, and whether Chuuya has ever been to Japan before. So he tells her about the way his dads made sure to take him here every few years, not wanting him to lose this part of his identity even though he's pretty much lived in France his whole life. She compliments his Japanese, and even though it's a friendly gesture, Chuuya can't help but cringe internally. It must sound terrible.

He's not that surprised anymore when the car pulls up in front of an enormous estate with a huge garden surrounding it, cherry blossom trees covering the area. It's stunning, and Chuuya feels... overwhelmed.

The driver helps him with his suitcases, and once inside, Hayashi gives him a tour of the house, all while talking his ear off. Chuuya gets a room with an attached bathroom all for himself. She shows them the children's rooms. The living room with a gigantic flat tv screen. Kitchen. Office. Three bathrooms. A freaking *pool.*

It's gigantic.

The minute they're done with the tour and Chuuya's considering whether he should take a long-needed shower or a nap, the front door opens, and an elderly woman, Hayashi introduces her as the occasional nursemaid, comes in with the two kids. Ryuunosoke and Gin.

They're both dressed in dark, fancy clothes, both tiny, and both of them stop when they spot him, staring at him with huge, wide eyes.

Hayashi squats down to their eye level with a cheery smile. "Hey, kids. Remember how I told you I'll let you meet a new friend soon? Well, here he is. Meet Chuuya-kun."

The girl, Gin, blinks a few times before lifting her hand and offering

him a shy wave. "Hello, Mr. Chuuya."

The boy only stares at him.

Well. This year is going to be *fun.*

"So you are the nanny."

Chuuya's heart freezes in his chest at the sudden voice behind him. It's two in the morning, and the only lights in the dark kitchen come from the open fridge and his phone lying on the counter, so when he turns around, he barely recognizes the person. His features are distinct, though —messy, dark brown hair and a jawline that looks like it was carved by god herself.

Dazai Osamu.

The oldest son.

Hayashi mentioned he would meet Dazai in the morning so Chuuya assumed he did, in fact, not live here anymore. Meeting him in the kitchen at two in the morning, instead, is a surprise in the form of a heart attack.

"Fuck," Chuuya hisses, clutching his chest. "You scared me."

Dazai's eyes narrow ever so slightly, and he tilts his head. "You're *French.*"

Chuuya's not sure whether that's a question or an observation, but he's finally recovered enough from the little shock to pick up on the first, frankly idiotic, comment. "Yes. And I'm not a nanny. I'm an —"

"— au pair boy." Dazai waves his hand as if he's heard that correction a thousand times before, which is absurd considering this is their first-ever meeting. "Yeah, yeah. Same thing. You look after kids."

There really isn't much Chuuya can say against that because technically he's right, but still, there is a difference, especially when Dazai says the word nanny like that. As if it's something *embarrassing.* "Sorry," Chuuya snaps, "I didn't realize having to work for money is considered embarrassing. My mistake to assume that we left the whole classism thing behind us."

To his credit, Dazai doesn't look nearly as surprised or offended as Chuuya hoped he would. Instead, his amusement only seems to grow.

"Oh, he's funny too." Pushing Chuuya seamlessly out of the way with a hand on his shoulder, he opens the fridge and gets out a bottle of Ice Tea. "French, ginger, *and* a comedian. It's like you were made just for me."

Chuuya almost chokes on his spit. "Pardon me?"

"Well, you are here to look after the children, no?"

"Yeah, your *six-year-old* siblings," Chuuya hisses. "Not you!"

Dazai leans back against the counter and shrugs. "Pity."

Shaking his head in irritation, Chuuya grabs his phone and turns to leave before he says something that will get him in trouble, but Dazai's not done, apparently. "What are you doing up so late anyway? You do know that my family likes to get up early, right?"

Chuuya's miserably aware of that — another point on the list of things he'll just have to work out somehow. "Jet lag," he says, ignoring the heavy weight of Dazai's gaze on him. "I couldn't sleep. What about you?"

"I had an appointment."

"At two in the morning?"

Dazai smirks. "Yes."

And *oh.* Chuuya rolls his eyes. How is it that they've known each other for less than five minutes, and he not only feels like strangling Dazai already but also knows about his booty calls? Chuuya's fathers would probably say it's his little attitude problem but *come on*. It's like Dazai didn't even *try* to be civil to the guy that's going to be living here for the next year.

"Well," Chuuya mutters, "whatever. Good night."

"See you in the morning, Chuuya ~"

Chuuya's pretty sure using his first name is an intentional show of disrespect, but he's too annoyed and too tired to do anything other than huff out a breath and leave.

Thanks to the twenty alarms on his phone, Chuuya manages to wake up early in the morning even though it's awful, he feels like a zombie,

and would rather sleep for another five hours. But he's supposed to officially meet the whole family at breakfast since both the father and Dazai were absent when Hayashi picked him up from the airport. Obviously, he already had the pleasure of meeting Dazai last night, but he has a feeling that's going to stay a secret between the two of them. Chuuya doubts his parents will get to hear about their son's late-night adventures.

Still having half of his things to unpack, he rummages through his suitcase for something to wear and then gets ready in the bathroom before finally looking somewhat decent. Judging by the sounds coming from the kitchen, it sounds like basically everyone's awake already. Everyone, Chuuya, notices, stepping inside, except for Dazai.

"Good morning."

"Oh," Hayashi says, closing the fridge with a brilliant smile, "you're awake. Chuuya-kun, I would like you to meet my husband. Gen'emon Tsushima." She gestures between them. "Darling, this is the newest addition to our little makeshift family. Nakahara Chuuya."

Gen'emon Tsushima is a very fine-looking man in his fifties with short dark hair and wearing a flawless black suit that looks like it costs more than everything Chuuya owns. Dazai's resemblance to him isn't hard to miss either. They both have sharp, striking features and give off an aura of arrogance and authority that makes everyone else in the room seem small and insignificant. Even as he gives Chuuya a nod, he feels scrutinized from top to bottom. "Welcome. I hope you enjoy your stay at my house."

Chuuya bows his head. "I'm really thankful to be here."

Sure, he's working for them, so it's not like they're housing him for free, but Chuuya supposes a bit of gratitude won't hurt, especially in a family like this. Not everyone gets a private bathroom, and from what's he's seen so far, the family is really friendly — well, except for Dazai —

"How rude ~"

Speak of the devil.

Just as Chuuya sits down, Dazai appears in the room, wearing a suit just as fine, if not even finer, as his father and a sharp smile on his lips. "No one bothered to wake me up, but lucky for all of you, I'm here anyway."

The reactions to that are oddly varying. Hayashi's face lights up into a beaming smile. Little Ryuu's eyes widen a bit as he looks at Dazai. Gin just continues eating. Tsushima scowls at his phone. As everyone settles around the table, Dazai basically steals his mother's spot, only to end up sitting next to Chuuya.

"I know you're an early bird, so I didn't think it was necessary to wake you up," Hayashi says, then turns to Ryuu. "Are you sure you don't want more tea, honey?"

Ryuu shakes his head.

A moment later, their personal chef, a man who introduced himself as Yuki yesterday, places a cup in front of him anyway.

"Drink," she instructs. "It will soothe your sore throat."

"So Chuuya," Dazai says, and his pulse immediately spikes, "how exactly did you end up here?"

Dazai's father clears his throat. "Son, how about you introduce yourself first?"

"Oh, but I did already. Yesterday. We met when Chuuya was ravaging our kitchen at night."

Chuuya curses silently. *Ravaging?* Fucking really?

"I'm sorry," he presses out, "I couldn't sleep because of the time difference and wanted something to dr—"

Hayashi waves him off. "Please. You're supposed to feel at home, honey."

"And what exactly were *you* doing at one in the morning, Dazai?" Tsushima asks.

"Getting myself a glass of water, thank you very much. So!" He turns back to Chuuya. "I'm all ears."

Stalling for time and patience, Chuuya takes a sip of his tea. "Well, I've always wanted to take a year abroad, especially in Japan, so the program seemed like the best choice."

"Why didn't you attend University?" Dazai prods. "Were your grades too bad?"

"My grades were *fine*," Chuuya says calmly, even though he feels himself starting to lose nonexistent patience. Sure, he wasn't the smartest person in his year, but what he lacked in cleverness, he made up in discipline and studying. "I just wasn't ready to pick something to study for the next five years, and I've always wanted to take a year abroad." It's only the partial truth, but they don't need to know that.

At that, Tsushima sets down his cup of coffee with more force than necessary before leveling a cold glare at his son. "That's enough. Either you behave, or you leave the table."

It's funny, really, because it feels like Dazai, a twenty-one-year-old guy, should be too old for behavior like this, but even though he doesn't lose his smugness, he, at least, turns his gaze back to his plate and remains quiet. Chuuya's not particularly happy that Tsushima had to step in — the questions weren't *that* bad, but he does enjoy the lack of words out of Dazai's mouth.

Hayashi fills the awkward silence that descends over the table by going over the children's schedule. Since the family has a cook and cleaning staff, Chuuya's main job is to take care of the kids: getting them ready for school, picking them up, and, according to Hayashi, being a *big brother*, which seems rather absurd, given that one is sitting right over there, but *oh well.*

After breakfast, Tsushima excuses himself and disappears into his office, Dazai wordlessly gets up, and Hayashi turns to Chuuya.

"It's Sunday," she says, "so the kids have the day off. How about I show you around Yokohama for a bit? You can see the city. We can get your subway ticket, and oh, there's a wonderful little market right nearby. You really have to try some of the food!"

Chuuya smiles. "I'd like that."

Back at home, his fathers have always tried their best to incorporate Japanese dishes into their cuisine, and once Chuuya was old enough to cook, he looked up youtube tutorials and recreated them, but he never felt like it came that close to the real deal.

"Kids, get dressed."

"I don't wanna," Ryuu mumbles, shoving his plate away and looking at his lap. His sister tugs at his sleeve then, and when he looks at her, she tilts her head, blinking. After a moment, he lets out a sigh. "Fine."

Chuuya watches them leave, bemused, before getting up himself.

"Leave the dishes," Hayashi says, waving her hand, and then her phone buzzes, and she frowns at it. "Oh, no."

"Is everything all right?"

"There's an issue with one of my clients. I... I have to leave." She sighs, worrying her lip, and looks around the room before narrowing her gaze on someone — Dazai. Chuuya was sure he was gone by now, but he's standing near the coffee machine, intently gazing at his phone, unaware that he's just become a target. Already knowing where this is going, Chuuya lets out an annoyed breath. "Osamu, honey. Will you come here for a sec?"

Dazai turns their head to them lazily and then saunters over, offering his mother a smile that's clearly only there for show. "What is it?"

"Are you free for the next..." Hayashi glances at the watch around her wrist and considers her words. "... let's say, two hours?"

"Depends on what you want me to do." His reply isn't even tinted in false politeness, but her genuine smile never wavers.

"Can you please show Chuuya-kun around? Get him his tickets? I would, but I really, really need to get to work, or that hag of a client will murder me."

Dazai makes a show of thinking about it. Chuuya has the strange urge to strangle him. "Okay," he finally says, "but you owe me."

Hayashi beams. "I do. Thank you so much, darling! The kids will be ready any minute now." She leaves the kitchen already dialing a number on the phone, leaving Chuuya alone with Dazai. Again. Great.

"The brats are coming?" Dazai asks then, and Chuuya can't help but snort.

"Yeah, your *siblings* are coming. Speaking off, I will make sure they're... doing all right."

As he walks down the hallway, he feels the heavy gaze of two eyes on his back. After slipping into clothes that are more suitable for the weather outside, so a high-collar shirt and black jeans, he knocks on Ryuu's door and finds him more or less destroying his room just to find a pair of socks. He ends up crawling under the bed to retrieve

them. Then they get Gin, who's lying on her bed and dreamily staring at the ceiling. Finally, all three of them descend the stairs to meet Dazai waiting for them in the foyer. Judging by the expression on his face Dazai's even less happy about this than Chuuya even though he was more than talkative just an hour ago — not to mention last night.

Chuuya has a feeling that has more to do with the kids, which is... weird. They're his *siblings*. Then again, Chuuya has yet to see Dazai spare a single glance in their direction, let alone exchange words with them.

This is going to be just great.

"Ready?" he asks once he's slipped into his coat and docs.

Dazai doesn't bother to answer; he just opens the door.

For a while, they just walk in silence, which would be awkward if Chuuya cared, but as it is, he's too busy taking in his surroundings. His arrival yesterday was too much of a hectic blur to properly look around, but now he can, and it's beautiful. So different from the neighborhood he grew up in, and even more different from the dreams in his head every time he went to sleep and wondered what it would have been like to grow up in the place he was born instead of Paris. This is *real*. Ryuu and Gin are walking ahead of them, probably already knowing the way to the subway. They look like tiny business people in their coats. And then Dazai shatters the peaceful silence by opening his mouth.

"What's wrong with your leg?"

Despite his best efforts, Chuuya feels his entire body tense. "You don't have any sense of tact, do you?"

"Only if I deem it necessary."

Chuuya snorts dryly and swallows down the hot, derelict anger in his throat. It's *fine*. It really is. "Accident."

"What kind of accident?" Dazai inquiries.

"A dancing one."

"You dance?"

It's not Dazai's tone that's annoying. Chuuya's lived through enough

oh, you — a guy — dance? moments in his life to accept that the reaction's going to be the same every time. That's not the reason why his muscles feel raw all of a sudden. "I did," he says and straightens his spine, just so that, even if he feels small and exposed right now, he doesn't look like it.

Dazai takes his answer with a thoughtful hum. It *should* be the end of this stupid conversation, but it isn't. *Really*, by now, Chuuya should know better.

"I see how it is then," Dazai drawls. "So you're an aspiring dancer, but an injury gets in the way of your big dream, and because it suddenly leaves you without any options, you decide to take a year off and become an au pair. Wow, amazing. It's like you were written straight out of a coming of age novel."

Chuuya blanches. What... who the hell does Dazai think he is? "Shut up," he finds himself hissing, "you have no—"

"—idea who you really are?" Dazai finishes, tilting his head. "Please, could you be any more stereotypical?"

It sucks that Chuuya actually meant to say that.

What sucks even more, is that Dazai somehow read the last year of his life in seconds, even if this *trivia* the bastard just discovered is now Chuuya's entire life. Because he did have to give up his spot in the dancing academy. Because every single plan he had for his future and career did burst like fucking bubbles. Because it did change the course of his life so deeply and profusely that Chuuya lost *months* in bed, being angry, so fucking angry that everything else became unimportant.

"You put two and two together," Chuuya snaps. "Good for you, asshole. I hope you choke on this information."

All Dazai does, though, is wave him off. "Relax. I would have found out one way or another eventually. Better to get all the dirty laundry out of the way now, no?"

It's not... dirty laundry. It's Chuuya's life. Something he has to live with every day. And it's not a fucking joke.

But he supposes telling that to an asshole like Dazai is futile.

Letting out a breath, Chuuya stuffs his hands into the pockets of his

coat. "What's yours, then?"

"Huh?"

"Your dirty laundry," he clarifies, keeping his voice even. "You have all the money in the world, yet you treat your family like shit. Did they not give you enough attention as a kid or something?"

"Fumiko is not my mother, and these two brats are not my siblings."

Chuuya's brows crease. "So just because they're adopted, and Hayashi's your step-mother, they're not your family?"

"Precisely."

"That's fucking stupid."

"Call it what you want. It doesn't change the fact that I don't owe them anything."

That's even more stupid. Ryuu and Gin are *children*, for fuck's sake.

"Is that why you go by Dazai then?"

"Mm. It was my mother's name."

"Who's the one being stereotypical now," Chuuya mutters and kicks a pebble with his healthy leg even though Dazai looks annoyingly unruffled by the topic.

"If you want some actual dirty laundry, you'll just have to dig a bit deeper, chibi."

Chibi?

"What?"

Dazai turns to him, brow raised.

"What was that word? *Chibi?*"

Asking this question feels like losing some sort of weird underlying battle that has been going on between them the moment they first met, but Chuuya's never heard the word *chibi* before... he thinks. Not in the lessons he took, in the words he looked up, or in the books he read.

And he can't go around with Dazai calling him things he doesn't know the meaning of.

The asshole's smile sharpens ever so slightly. "Oh, that? It's like me saying... *mon ami*."

Chuuya's eyes narrow. "You speak French?"

"I had to pick two foreign languages for my degree."

Interesting, but not surprising. Still, Dazai's stupid answer sounded off. For all Chuuya knows, it could be a load of horse shit. "So if I google the word," Chuuya says slowly, "will it confirm what you just told me?"

Dazai shrugs. "Sure. I think you require data for that, though."

Damn it.

With a sigh, Chuuya rolls his eyes and decides to trust him. *For now.*

He'll look up the actual meaning back in his room where he has wifi.

The rest of the walk to the subway isn't... that bad. Dazai's kind of entertaining when he's not busy being a pretentious jerk and Chuuya finds himself snorting out laughter every now and then at his morbid sense of humor. Not to say that Chuuya's *enjoying* his presence because fuck no.

He knows guys like Dazai all too well. Rich, spoiled brat who's blinded by all his money to recognize how good he has it. And he knows the *other* side of guys like him even better. Their pretty faces and pretty words that make everything they say sound like sex — and Chuuya can't think about sex every time he's supposed to do his job as an au pair here, *especially* not with his little problem.

Or, well, inclination.

Whatever. Dazai's probably straight anyway. Casting a glance towards him, Chuuya frowns. He *looks* straight. Kind of.

Dazai explains the subway system in a few brief sentences, buys him the one-year-ticket, then takes all of them to the market one station away. Funny. Chuuya was sure he wouldn't bother with that, but maybe — who is he kidding it's *definitely* what happened — Hayashi bribed Dazai while Chuuya was getting dressed. Anything else

wouldn't make sense.

Chuuya's still eating when Dazai discards his rice balls — even though he was far from finished — in the closest trash can and gives him a look. "So what do you think?"

"Uh," Chuuya chews and swallows, noticing Ryuu do the same with his poor food before he frowns at Dazai, "it was good. Delicious."

Dazai only raises his brows.

"What?"

"And of your host family? Yokohama? *Me*?"

Oh. "Your family's really nice. You, on the other hand..."

Surprisingly, that elicits a warm chuckle from Dazai as he stuffs his hands into the pockets of his super fancy, black coat. "Don't worry, chibi. You'll come to love me eventually."

"Yeah," Chuuya scoffs and shakes his head, "I highly doubt that."

Dazai's gaze is dizzyingly intense as he says, "And I love a good challenge."

Chapter 2: Stealing. Cheating. Manipulating

Chapter Notes

CW for this chapter:
- alcohol

Slowly Chuuya settles into a routine.

He wakes up at half-past six even if it takes twenty alarms and, at least, one meltdown to get up every time, he wakes Ryuu and Gin, makes sure there's something to eat for them, wakes Gin again because she likes to sleep in as much as he does, he eats breakfast, and then it's time for school. Getting them dressed, especially Gin, whose choice in clothes drastically varies between all-black outfits and pink dresses and skirts every day, takes much more time and effort than one might think.

So by the time they're out of the door, they have to hurry quite a bit. The school's only a good five-minute walk away but add two kids that get distracted by funny-looking sticks on the ground, and suddenly it's a fifteen-minute one. When Chuuya has time to spare, he grabs Diablo, the family rottweiler, to beat two sticks with one stone. Nine out of ten times, Ryuu and Gin are enough as it is already, though.

The fun part starts when the kids are in school. Usually, Chuuya would have house duties, make lunch or clean their rooms, but the staff takes care of all that, so it leaves him with some free time. More often than not, he takes a nap because *duh*. When he's energized on coffee, though, he explores Yokohama instead, throwing all the money he saved out of the window like a lunatic every time he enters a store. Chuuya's well aware he could have bought chain belts and fishnet tights back at home — god, he already has six pairs... but somehow, they look more appealing here. He also facetimes a lot with his dads, homesickness slowly catching up to him.

At two, it's time to pick up the kids, make them eat lunch, and then make sure they're on time for their individual violin and piano lessons.

He barely sees Tsushima, but Hayashi makes an effort to be there for her kids as much as possible; Chuuya can see that.

Dazai's... well, Dazai has a room in the house, though Chuuya hasn't had any reason to enter it so far — and he doesn't plan to either, but

Dazai's rarely around anyway. Chuuya only sees him here and there in-between grocery-runs with Diablo, and at ungodly hours at night when no one else is awake in the house.

One morning, when Chuuya's stumbling to the kitchen, still half-asleep, he almost runs into Dazai. He has to blink several times before realizing that one: Dazai's half-naked, only a black towel around his hips, and two: not half-naked after all. His entire body, up to his neck and hands, is covered in white bandages.

"What —" Chuuya starts, brows furrowing, and stops short. "Are you hurt?"

Dazai offers him a glazed smile, which, even before he opens his mouth, makes Chuuya feel stupid just for asking. *Fuck him*. "Not where it matters."

The reply, the bandages, and fuck — everything else about Dazai is cryptic, so Chuuya simply arches one brow, and for one drawn-out moment, they just stand there. Staring. Then Dazai reaches out and tugs at one of the strands that stick up from Chuuya's head.

Chuuya slaps the hand away.

Later, when he manages to wake up Gin and drag her out of bed, he only hears the door fall shut, and for the next few days, Dazai is nowhere to be seen, which, according to Hayashi, is a common occurrence around here.

Chuuya has been in Yokohama for almost two entire weeks when Friday rolls around and with that, a breakfast table that's occupied by all five members of the family — even Diablo, who's loitering around nearby

and gnawing at a bone.

Hayashi's the one doing most of the talking, and since Chuuya likes her — and takes pity on her — he indulges in whatever topics she brings up, no matter how tedious or out of his range of interests. Ryuu and Gin aren't big talkers aside from occasional grumbling, and neither are Dazai and his father — to his family, at least, since Tsushima spends a lot of time taking phone calls. *Very busy man.*

That said, Chuuya isn't surprised that when Dazai casually mentions he's invited to a birthday tomorrow, Hayashi immediately follows up with, "Oh, you should bring Chuuya-kun!"

Surprised? No. But very, very annoyed.

"I don't think that's necessary," Chuuya says, faking a smile.

"Believe me, it *is*. I know you have a job here, but you're also in Japan to see the world! Meet new people! And how many have you met, pray tell?"

Chuuya's lips press together. Well, if she says it like *that*.

It's not like he doesn't want to meet people. Fuck, he absolutely does. Spending all year holed up in this house is not on his to-do list, but... meeting new people in a country that's t*echnically* his too, but not *really*, is more challenging than he expected it to be. His accent is glaringly apparent, and even though Chuuya, somewhere in the back of his mind, knows that he shouldn't feel like a stranger or a tourist here, he still does because, in the end, he grew up in France with two French fathers and French friends, a French boyfriend, and even a french fucking bulldog — no offense to Baki, though. She's a treasure, and he misses her like crazy.

"I'm still getting settled in."

That, and Chuuya just doesn't want to spend an entire night with Dazai.

It just sounds like a recipe for disaster.

"Come on," Hayashi says with a grin, then turns to Dazai. "Osamu, you wouldn't mind, would you?"

Everything about Dazai's expression radiates, *yes, he would*. What comes out is, "Not at all. I have *delightful* friends."

"That birthday isn't the time for your childish jokes," Tsushima suddenly says, and Chuuya can't help but frown at the sudden grave depth of his tone. "Don't do anything stupid."

"Who, me?" Dazai asks innocently. "I wouldn't dare."

If possible, his father's glare only intensifies. "Be responsible for once in your life."

At that, Dazai's smoldering gaze travels to Chuuya, and he cocks his head. *Daring him*. "Naturally. The question is: will Chuuya even come?"

He should say no.

He wants to say no.

But Chuuya has never been good at backing down from a fight before, and he's not going to start now. *So*.

"Sounds good."

"Then it's a date."

After breakfast, Chuuya refuses to think about stupid Dazai and his damn party more than necessary. He has a few hours to waste, and he intends to spend them wisely. But, of course, Dazai even crosses *this* plan by preventing the door in Chuuya's room from falling shut with his foot, leaning against the doorframe with an amused look.

"What?" Chuuya asks, exasperated.

"You don't sound very excited for someone who gets to go to an exclusive party tomorrow. With *me*."

Chuuya scoffs. "I've been to birthday parties, so I don't see any reason to piss my pants over it."

"Well, you should. I'm very fun."

"Yeah, your father seems to think so too."

If it strikes a nerve, Dazai doesn't show, his smirk only deepening. "It's a black and white party. I hope you have something to wear."

Oh, he has. Chuuya has quite a few obsessions, including clothes. The two gigantic suitcases lying in the corner of his rooms are proof of that.

"Don't worry."

"Be ready by nine tomorrow."

Chuuya nods, and then, being the polite person he is, he holds up the door for Dazai to point him where to go. Namely *out*. "Goodbye."

As promised, there is a knock at his door at point nine o'clock, and Chuuya opens to see Dazai. His gaze on him is nothing short of appreciative.

"Ah. I approve."

That was the point when Chuuya picked out the skintight leather pants and silk shirt — all black, obviously. *But.*

"No one asked," Chuuya huffs and deliberately doesn't look at Dazai — even though he *could*, and there's a lot to appreciate in his all-white outfit and the hair that's delicately tucked behind his air. *So much to appreciate.*

"Are you always this grumpy, or am I the only one who gets the honor?" Dazai asks as they walk down the hallway. "Because the people I associate with are fun, but they also appreciate not getting snapped at every two seconds."

That manages to put a damp on Chuuya's satisfaction, and he forces himself to relax his jaw muscles. "I'm not grumpy, I'm just —"

"Rude? Opinionated? Easy to irritate?"

"Are you trying to be a dictionary or a person?"

"Add *funny* to the list."

"I'll play nice," Chuuya snaps, which kind of contradicts his point, "because I *am* nice. Your mother likes me. And so do the kids. Everyone but—"

"But me? I would, but you keep barking at me like a rabid dog, chibi, and I would prefer not to get bitten."

"Maybe if you stopped interrupting me every three seconds."

Grabbing keys off the counter and opening the door, Dazai offers him a wide smile. "Deal. I let you finish your sentences, and your sentences stop insulting me all the time."

"Whatever," Chuuya murmurs and then stops because a car and a freaking chauffeur are waiting for them outside. "Really?" he asks, shooting Dazai a look. "You can't drive yourself?"

"We're going to a party with alcohol," Dazai tells him with that air of *obviously* in his expression, "and I'm not planning to lose my driver's license again any time soon."

Pretentious... but valid.

(Wait. *Again?*)

The car starts moving softly as soon as they close the doors; Chuuya watches the neighborhood disappear.

"So, who's the birthday kid?"

"His name's Fitzgerald. He's from New York but here for business. Turned twenty-five a few days ago. A humongous douche."

"If he's a douche," Chuuya says, "why are we going?"

Dazai looks at him like he just asked whether the earth is flat. "Because he knows how to throw a good party." When Chuuya only huffs in reply, he adds, "And because my father likes to keep his potential partners close."

Ah. That makes more sense.

"What are you giving the douche then?"...and should Chuuya have brought something as well?

"A white stallion."

He almost chokes on his spit. "What?"

Dazai's eyes crinkle in visible amusement. "I heard he likes to play Polo in his free time."

"Yeah, and I like looking at diamond chokers on Pinterest," Chuuya mutters and waves his hand through the air. "I'll send you a link, so you know what to buy me for my birthday."

"That depends on how nice you will be tonight."

"Oh, I can be nice."

He's not necessarily dying to have bathtubs full of money — there are obviously more important things in life — but it sure sounds nicer to do that while wearing pretty clothes and expensive, shiny chokers, right?

If it weren't for the dozen cars parked in front of the building, it wouldn't seem like a location to throw a gigantic party, but as it is, there are lots of them, and all kinds of people dressed in a mix of black and white clothes waiting to get inside.

"Looks more like a club than a birthday party," he remarks when Dazai's driver — a bald man with rigid lines on his face but a warm smile — lets them out in front of the stairs that lead up to the entrance.

"Because his parties are better than any club."

Chuuya's not surprised that Dazai casually leads the two of them past the line of people, and after saying his name to the three bodyguards, they get to enter without any more preamble.

The walls are apparently thick enough to conceal loud sounds because the music that's booming through the speakers inside is deafening. There's an escalator that takes them up, and then they're there, a frankly overwhelming crowd of black and white greeting them.

"And?" Dazai nudges his side with his elbow and leans close to his ear. "Just like the birthday parties you've been to?"

Chuuya softly hits him back. "Gloating doesn't look good on you, asshole."

"Don't forget our deal. Be nice."

"I am," he says, holding his gaze. "Think of me saying *asshole* being like me saying *mon ami*. That's nice, isn't it?"

Dazai's smirk stretches. "You're interesting, Chuuya. I like that."

He bites down another rude reply and just nods towards the party that's waiting for them, feeling like he already needs a cold shower. This is why he thought this was a bad idea. *Dazai and everything about him* is a bad idea. "Lead the way then."

Dazai does. Towards the bar.

It's packed with people, but the bartender is quick and efficient, so they only have to wait for a few minutes before it's their turn. Dazai signals something that Chuuya doesn't really understand then arches a brow for him to do the same. It doesn't feel like a cozy night to enjoy a glass of wine, and if he's honest, Chuuya doesn't really have any clue about drinks and cocktails. His experience back home was limited to getting trashed by mixing vodka with juice or just drinking shots since he wasn't old enough for bars and clubs, and then the accident happened, and even though he was finally of legal age, the last thing on his mind was going out. To fancy schmancy parties, at least. He

visited enough shitholes.

"Tequila?" Chuuya says and cringes at how unsure he sounds. He clears his throat. "A shot of tequila, please."

The bartender nods at two different bottles, asking a silent question. *Right.* "The white one."

When he turns back to Dazai, there's an annoying flash of amusement in his eyes. "I thought you've been to birthday parties before?"

"Oh, shut up."

"This isn't your first time drinking, right?"

Chuuya shoots him a glare. "*No!*"

Thankfully, the bartender slides over their drinks, and Chuuya has an excuse to look away from Dazai and throw back the shot. This is definitely *not* his first rodeo. Though he will have to be careful since his tolerance isn't exactly... high, and Chuuya doesn't plan to let Dazai see him completely trashed.

He has a dignity to preserve here.

That doesn't stop him from ordering a second shot, just to ease some of the tension that seems to have found a home in him.

"Well, if this isn't the prodigal son," a voice suddenly says behind Dazai. "I wasn't sure if you'd show."

Chuuya watches Dazai turn around, his face morphing into a smirk. "Ranpo-san," he says with an acknowledging nod. "I wouldn't miss this for the world."

The man — Ranpo — scoffs at that, then shoots a glance towards Chuuya. "Who's your boy toy over there?"

Chuuya scowls. "I'm his *au pair.*"

"Chuuya here is the au pair at home," Dazai confirms nonchalantly. "I'm giving him a break from the tedious routine of looking after the brats and playing scribble with Hayashi."

Ranpo *ohs*. "How do you like it so far?"

Chuuya's about to reply with something about the lack of manners of

the people he's met but remembers his stupid deal with Dazai just in time to bite his tongue. Yeah, no, he promised to play nice. "It's great," he presses out. "I love it."

"You're still alive. That must mean something," Ranpo remarks like he didn't say anything at all, making Chuuya's brows furrow even more.

"I promised Chuuya my wonderful friends," Dazai says, pushing away from the bar. "Where is Akiko?"

"Busy, but the others are at the buffet. You should really try the chocolate parfaits."

Dazai lets out a sigh. "I guess they'll have to do." Turning to Chuuya, he raises one brow and tilts his head invitingly. "Ready?"

"Sure."

Following their lead, Chuuya can't help but appreciate Ranpo's pitch black suit from behind. He might be kind of weird, but, at least, he makes a pretty sight.

They weave through the thick crowd, and Ranpo steers them towards a group of young people gathered around a high table. "Look, who I found," Ranpo announces as he squeezes himself between two people.

"A bucket?" a guy with a long, blond ponytail with glasses asks. "Because Tanizaki is about to throw up."

"Even better."

"A glass of water?" A redhead moans and lifts his head to smile weakly at Dazai. "Hello, Dazai-san. You don't —" He hiccups. "— happen t'have water?"

Dazai frowns. "Someone just give the poor guy some water."

"Oh, I can do that," a blonde girl volunteers. "By the way, i-it's good to see you again, Dazai-san!" She's off before anyone can even reply.

Well... Chuuya expected spoiled trust-fund brats. This must be the uncensored version of that.

"Chuuya," Dazai, not all to gently pushes him forward, "meet Kunikida and Tanizaki. Kunikida and Tanizaki, meet Chuuya. He's an au pair."

"Chuuya!" Tanizaki exclaims enthusiastically. "I swear to you, I'm

usually n'like th—" He lets out a burp into his hand. "—not like this!"

"Hey, it's cool," Chuuya says, giving him an awkward smile. "We've all been there."

"Some of us more than others," Kunikida sighs. "So you live at the Tsushimas?"

"Yup."

"I hope Dazai and his antics haven't scared you off then. Yokohama is a great city, and this is probably a wonderful opportunity for you."

"Kunikida-kun~" Chuuya hears Dazai next to him. "Ye of little faith."

"I have exactly the right amount of faith in you. So," he turns back to Chuuya, "where are you from? France, I assume?"

"Yeah. Paris."

"What are your thoughts on your new president?"

"Uh," Chuuya blinks, not sure how they suddenly arrived at the topic of politics. "He's all right, I guess...?"

"You're boring him to death, Kunikida-Kun," Ranpo interjects as he shoves his spoon into a parfait. "Have you seen the bouncy castle?"

"There's a bouncy castle?" Chuuya asks.

"Don't go there after eight cocktails!" Tanizaki warns him. "Or you'll get very very sick."

Kunikida shakes his head, looking like a disappointed mother. "Or, simply drink responsibly."

Ranpo ignores both of them and winks at Chuuya instead. "There's also a chocolate fountain, a nap room, a karaoke station, and a photo booth. I can show you around if you want."

Oh.

Chuuya's about to reply with *something* when the blonde girl from before comes back, carrying a bottle of water and a plate of food. "I come bearing presents!"

"That's Higuchi," Dazai tells him before taking a sip of his drink that

he must have brought along, making Chuuya crave more, too. Even though Tanizaki is the perfect example of how he *doesn't* want to end up tonight, he feels way too sober for this group of people — and this entire party, really.

"I need another drink," Chuuya says.

"Me too," Ranpo says. "Bring me something sweet."

Bruh.

"And I need to deal with something," Dazai murmurs, staring at something or someone in the crowd before his eyes flicker to Chuuya. "Will you be okay here for a minute?"

Chuuya rolls his eyes jokingly. "Sure. Go on."

Dazai pushes away from the table with a nod and makes his way through the crowd. Only then, Chuuya notices that he's steering towards two people next to the buffet — a tall blonde guy talking to a girl with a bob, wearing a glittery black mini dress.

The next half hour is a chaotic mess of trying to keep up with Dazai's friends. After Higuchi introduces herself, she's kind enough to order drinks for Chuuya and Ranpo, then some other people arrive, Tanizaki starts singing in his alcohol-induced coma, and Chuuya keeps having to explain to strangers that he's an au pair from France. The reactions to his connection to Dazai Osamu drastically vary, some people saying that he's *so* lucky, and others just giving him a pitying pat on the shoulder. Then, all of a sudden, the music comes to a screeching halt, lights dimming everywhere around them.

"Oh," Kunikida mutters, pushing up the glasses on his nose. "This again."

"I love this part," Higuchi says with an excited grin.

Chuuya feels incredibly *lost*. "What's happening?" he asks.

"Fitzgerald holds *games* at his parties," Ranpo explains, "but it's not that interesting. Only really relevant for — well, for people like you."

"Huh?"

"Just listen."

The stage — that Chuuya hasn't even noticed until now — lights up

with a bunch of special effects, illuminating one man standing there. Actually, Chuuya realizes it's the same guy Dazai went to talk to earlier (and still hasn't returned from).

"Hello. Hi. Welcome." The guy, who must be none other than Fitzgerald, is speaking into a microphone, though his voice is *heard* everywhere. Probably even outside. "Thank you all for joining my wonderful little party and all your lovely presents. I'm not planning to hold a grand speech because we all know what's coming, so let me jump straight to the point. This year's game is a lottery... with a twist. All of you will get a sticker with a number on it —" On cue, several girls in white angel-costumes appear out of seemingly *nowhere* and just start sticking round stickers with a number on them to people's clothes. Chuuya gets a *49* on his chest. "— and at point two in the morning, I will announce three random numbers that will win *exceptional prices*! Of course, to spice things up a little, I'm making it a rule to have no rules! Everything is allowed. Cheating. Stealing. Manipulating. As a wise man once said... go crazy. Go Stupid. Thank you, and have fun!"

The stage goes dark as quickly as it lit up, and an excited murmur falls over the crowd before the music picks up again.

The fuck.

Chuuya looks into the round. Ranpo and Kunikida look extremely unimpressed, while Higuchi is basically jumping up and down in excitement.

"What kind of prices are we talking about?" Chuuya dares to ask.

"Trips to Bora Bora. A brand new Bugatti Chiron. A 20,000$ check," Ranpo provides with a casual shrug.

"Once," Higuchi raves, "someone won a meet and greet with Beyonce!"

Tanizaki makes a sound at that.

"Every day that man wakes up and chooses violence," Kunikida mutters.

"Fitzgerald really just wants to see the world burn. It was funny the first time, but now it's just sad." Ranpo shoots Chuuya a look then. "Do you want my sticker?"

"What?"

"You need it more than I do."

"Consider this my sign of condolence for living with Dazai for an entire year," Kunikida says in a grave voice before giving up his sticker as well.

"Sorry," Higuchi looks sheepish as she scratches the nape of her neck, "but I'd really like to meet Beyonce."

"All of you are ridiculous," he says because this entire night *is.* Even if a trip to Bora Bora sounds nice, Chuuya's not going to fight strangers over it, let alone at a freaking birthday party. He's just going to play nice with Dazai and let *him* pamper him.

Later, he will wonder why the fuck he thought this idea made *sooo* much sense while he was tipsy.

Speaking of Dazai, he's still nowhere to be seen.

"I'm going to get another drink."

The group is too busy talking about something Beyonce-related to even hear him, so Chuuya makes his way to the bar alone. There are three stickers on his chest, but he doubts that really matters until he feels some guy several feet away staring holes into him. Chuuya frowns but turns back to the bartender. *Ignorance is bliss.* And he can't get involved in a fight over *stickers* on his second week in Yokohama. Except that the moment he grabs the cocktail, that fucking guy just grabs his chest —

And his stickers.

It's not even about the fucking lottery — even though, yes, Chuuya has a competitive streak in him. It's about the complete lack of respect and the invasion of his personal space. So he does the first thing that comes to him and rams his elbow into the dude's face. Something cracks. Chuuya's drink spills. The guy curses as he clutches his nose. "What the fuck?!"

"Yeah, what the fuck?" Chuuya echoes. "Don't fucking touch me."

"I was going for your stickers — it's a game, you psycho —"

"I don't care! You don't just grab someone!"

The guy staggers to his feet and lunges, only to get hauled back by the

collar of his suit by none other than Dazai.

Great.

Now he chooses to come back?

Dazai watches him fall to his ass with a blank expression before grabbing Chuuya's arm and tugging him along. "We're going."

"My drink —"

Dazai throws him a look. "Oh, forget your drink."

Letting out a long sigh, Chuuya stops resisting and forces his ankle to keep up with Dazai's long strides. "Just so we're clear, I didn't start it."

"Somehow, I have trouble believing that."

"He grabbed me like I was a banana, and he was a starving monkey!" Chuuya's frustration turns into confusion. "Where are we going?"

"Outside," Dazai says and opens the door to lead them to a balcony. "Do you smoke?"

"Yeah."

Wordlessly, Dazai offers him a cigarette, then lights it for him before doing the same for himself. The October air is cold, but smoking makes Chuuya feel warm inside, and for a few peaceful moments, they just stand there quietly.

Then Chuuya asks, "Are you going to tattle on me?"

"I'm not a tattler."

"Yeah, you are. You told your mother I was *ravaging* the kitchen after we first met."

Dazai's expression almost breaks, the twitch of his lips so subtle no one would notice if they didn't pay attention. "That wasn't tattling. I wanted to rile you up."

Chuuya exhales the smoke in his lungs with a frown. "*Why*?"

Dazai's eyes meet his. "Because I like to know what kind of people sleep under my roof." A shrug. "And because you get that frown when you're annoyed." He lifts his hand and pokes Chuuya's brow. "Yeah,

like this one. It's cute."

Chuuya fights to keep his expression neutral.

This is *flirting*.

His fucking *host brother* is hitting on him, and Chuuya *likes* it. Dazai's fingers don't linger; he lets his hand fall back to his side and cocks his head as if to say: *there. What's your next move?*

"If you think pissing me off is a good strategy to flirt with me," Chuuya says, "then you're really fucking bad at this."

"Am I, though?"

Yes.

No,

There's a livewire cursing through Chuuya's spine, and denying it would be like refusing to see a fucking forest fire. Dazai's methods might be questionable, but his aim is dead-on.

Still.

"You could at least try to do better," Chuuya says, daring *him*.

"I don't just *try*, chibi."

"Well, you don't get to make half-ass attempts and get what you want either."

"What I want, huh?"

They're both well aware that it's a fact — fuck, *Dazai* started it — so Chuuya's not going to waste his breath explaining himself. He says nothing but ever so slightly raises his chin.

"How about another drink, and then you can decide if my *attempts* are worth your precious time?"

Chuuya hates that even when Dazai's groveling for ass, he still manages to make himself look like a king doing charity. "Why not," Chuuya replies with a practiced shrug. "I guess a little entertainment wouldn't hurt."

Dazai's smile is way too knowing for his liking, but it's also kind of

hot, so Chuuya lets him get away with it.

After squashing out their cigarettes, Dazai places a hand on his spine to guide him back inside, and it makes every nerve in Chuuya's body pulse with something akin to anticipation. And maybe, a little bit of dread. Dazai leads them to a bar that's less crowded than the main one, located next to the infamous chocolate fountain Ranpo mentioned earlier, and several tables that offer the opportunity to sit down. There aren't that many people here either, so it feels oddly intimate.

Sitting down, Chuuya feels like this is a date and not the verbal foreplay of whatever is about to happen next, which is *weird* because surely Dazai just wants a quick fuck, right? He certainly seems like the type.

Except that Dazai opens his mouth, and... Chuuya's worries vanish.

It's not any of that fancy-schmancy flirting he expected — not much of flirting at all, to be honest. Dazai just talks to him like they're friends, telling him about the first time Tanizaki got shitfaced at a brunch with his parents and pretty much every big gun in the city present, or about the one time Ranpo got lost in the city when he had to take the subway because he was so used to being chauffeured around. It feels like the way it should have been after they first met.

No weird animosities over the breakfast table. No offensive comments about his leg. No silent games and competitions that seem to happen every time they share the same room. Just... two people talking about shit.

And Chuuya has no idea if *this* is Dazai's grand strategy, or if this is him merely acting like an ordinary twenty-one-year-old for once. It probably doesn't even matter because it's working either way. Even despite his best efforts, Chuuya finds himself grinning over the rim of his glass. What can he say? Dazai's fun.

"Okay," Chuuya says eventually, "I need to piss, and then we can..."

"Take a nap in the nap room?" Dazai offers innocently.

"Yeah, something like that."

Chuuya only notices how drunk he is when he takes a look in the bathroom mirror. *Whoa*. It's not the Tanizaki kind of drunk that robs all of his memories and brain cells — Dazai made sure of that with

enough water, but the *everything's so fun and amazing* kind of drunk. The kind of drunk that tells him having sex with his host brother is a good idea.

It dawns on him.

Chuuya's going to have sex with Dazai.

Dazai.

He has quite the body count, but Dazai will be by far one of the most interesting ones. And *complicated* ones. *Jesus*, Chuuya realizes, *so complicated.*

This isn't just someone he met over a fucking "dating" app and that he'll never have to see again afterwards. They literally live in the same house. Seeing each other. Every day. For a year. Granted, Dazai seems to be a busy guy, so maybe not *every day*.

No.

"You can't fuck Dazai," Chuuya tells his reflection in the mirror. It has the potential to turn into a disaster.

But.

There's a humongous *but.*

Which is that Dazai's really hot in that *I want to punch him* kind of way. Chuuya splashes some water on his face and takes a deep breath. This is going to happen. He might as well embrace it.

After making sure there isn't any food stuck in his teeth, Chuuya finally leaves the fancy restroom, still formulating an excuse for taking him so long when he sees that their table is empty. He takes a look around.

Dazai is nowhere to be seen.

The pair sitting a few tables away from them must take pity on Chuuya since they wordlessly gesture towards the main bar. He thanks them with a nod and goes to look for the bastard. As silver-tongued as Dazai is, he still lacks basic fucking manners. You don't just vanish on the guy you've been trying to seduce for the last hour when he's in the bathroom.

Of course, the main hall is overflowing with people, so the task of

finding the damn idiot becomes ten times more annoying. The fact that half of the crowd is wearing white doesn't help. It takes Chuuya ten humiliating minutes to *finally* spot Dazai talking to some girl several feet away.

He's just about to walk over when Dazai squeezes her gently to his side, laughing, and the next thing he knows, the girl loops her arms around his neck and kisses him.

Chuuya comes to a sudden halt. Someone behind him stumbles into his back with a curse.

The way Dazai's holding her looks too familiar, too comfortable to be a fling. Chuuya remembers all too well how he acted with his first and only boyfriend after several years spent together, how easy it was to lean in and kiss him, and how natural it felt to hold his hand.

This — Dazai and that girl — looks exactly like that.

Chuuya also remembers how his hands shook after he found out the same boyfriend had cheated on him.

"Cute, huh?" someone says next to him.

Chuuya glances over to see one of the guys that hung around Higuchi earlier — short red hair, lots of piercings, and always smirking like he's in some cosmic joke that the rest of the world doesn't know about.

"Tachihara," he says, "remember me?"

"Sure." Chuuya's lungs feel way too tight for small talk right now, but he forces himself to nod. "They're... together?"

"Since they were kids. Dazai and Yosano. Yosano and Dazai. The prince and the princess. You seriously didn't know?"

"No." His smile is a bitter and brittle thing. "Dazai must have forgotten to mention that."

"Huh." Tachihara makes a face. "Yeah, they've been together for ages now. I always thought they wouldn't make it past high school, but here they are. I guess it's nice to see that, you know, true love and all still exists." Even while saying it, though, he sounds unconvinced.

And for good reason.

Chuuya tears his eyes away from — from that. His hands keep

clenching and unclenching at his sides. "I don't believe in that shit."

"In what? True love?"

"Yeah."

He knows he's speaking with the cynism of someone who was cheated on, and now apparently, someone who *almost* became someone's mistress for the night... but aren't these reasons good enough to lose all the fucking hope in the world? He doesn't see the point in trying to find a partner for life if that partner is just going to wake up one day and decide that they're going to spit on everything you built together and fuck someone else. It's a cruel realization, but it makes it easier not to get hurt.

Chuuya's tired of being hurt.

"What do you believe in then?" Tachihara asks. The question is innocent enough if you close your eyes, but Chuuya isn't blind. He can see how Tachihara eyed him earlier and is eyeing him *now*.

Dazai might be an even bigger asshole than he thought he is, and tomorrow Chuuya will probably have to deal with unpacking whatever stunt that bastard tried to pull, but tonight...

Tonight he can still have some fun and *forget* for a while.

Chuuya turns to Tachihara. "I believe that there's sex with and without feelings. Nothing more and nothing less than that." He cocks his head. He grins. "This party is starting to bore me. Wanna get out of here?"

Tachihara looks as if the take-out he ordered two hours ago finally arrived at his doorstep. "Yeah," he blurts out. "Sure. That's a great idea."

And it *is*.

Chapter 3: Fake What Now?

The next morning, Chuuya's walk of shame becomes infinitely worse when his good-for-nothing one-night stand refuses to wake up no matter how many goddamn times he shakes his shoulder.

Well, Tachihara was good for *a lot of things* less than a few hours ago, but now, when Chuuya could use at least a scrap of information on their whereabouts, considering he's only been in Yokohama for two weeks, he's pretty fucking useless. All Chuuya got from the cab ride to Tachihara's place was that it felt too long and that he lives above a tattoo studio because... he works there? Chuuya's also pretty sure that Tachihara mentioned being in a band.

That, or it was a very vivid alcohol-induced dream.

Chuuya gives up on trying to wake him up and slips out of bed, taking a moment to orientate himself in the crammed micro-apartment as a dull headache starts forming in the back of his skull. His clothes are scattered all over the floor. His phone is... on Tachihara's nightstand. *Thank god.* The last thing he needs is to lose his phone.

Once he's put on his clothes, Chuuya takes one last look at Tachihara idly snoring in his sleep and dips the fuck out of there. Leaving through an empty and dark tattoo studio makes him feel vaguely criminal, and his muscles only relax when the chilly five in the morning air rushes into his lungs.

He has no option but to get a cab, so he finds a spot on the side of the road, wraps his arms around himself, and waits.

Standing there, feeling gross, still mildly drunk, freezing to death, and with a severe case of cotton-mouth, Chuuya wishes he would have put more thought into what the hell he was doing when he made the decision to go home with a stranger. The ride back to the Tsushimas will probably cost him two weeks' worth of salary. Not to mention what he's going to do if his host family asks him where he spent the night since he wouldn't put it past Dazai to tattle on him — and it still wouldn't be the worst thing he'll have done.

Sure, it's not like spending the night somewhere else is a crime,

but it sure as hell won't make him look *good*.

And it's all *Dazai's* fault.

If he just — if he hadn't been such a liar and bastard and cheater who just *had to* start the whole flirting thing, Chuuya would have never felt the need to go home with Tachihara without telling anybody. He could have arrived home like a good au pair and not have to worry about money and what his host family's going to think of him.

That damn bastard.

But even aside from the obvious frustrations, Chuuya feels something much more bitter and hateful gnaw at him. Chuuya despises cheating more than anything else in the world, and the fact that Dazai almost made him *complicit* in something so — so...

It *repulses* him.

Whatever spark might have been there between the two of them? It's dead now. For good. Dazai made sure of that. Chuuya has no interest in being friends or even tolerating someone like that. Even if that means the next eleven months will be ugly and uncomfortable. He couldn't give less of a shit.

Finally, a cab stops for him. Chuuya rattles off the address and then lets his head rest against the seat as the car starts moving. They've been driving for almost twenty minutes when his phone buzzes in his pocket and, for the first time since last night, he remembers to check it.

15 Missed Calls.

He doesn't have to wonder from *who* for long since there are a few texts, too. Chuuya's not sure where Dazai got his number from, but that doesn't matter anyway.

Chuuya gets *some* sort of bitter satisfaction out of the knowledge that

Dazai must be worried — if not about Chuuya, then about his own ass and what his parents would say if he had to tell him that he accidentally lost their au pair. For a few delightful seconds, he considers delaying his arrival home even further, just for the fun of it.

But *no.*

If Dazai's so concerned, there is a slight chance that he hasn't told his family yet. This means they could resolve this without Hayashi and

Tsushima ever finding out about his little adventure.

Chuuya stuffs his phone back into his pocket and spends the rest of the

ride dozing. He pays with Paypal because he absolutely did not think he'd need that kind of money when he went out yesterday. His heart breaks a little throwing that kind of money out of the window.

Taking a deep breath, he then walks up the stairs to the house and lets himself in.

At first, it's quiet in the hallway, dark, and he thinks, *thank god everyone's still asleep*. Then a light switches on in the kitchen nearby, the dreadful sound of steps echoing through the room, and a moment later, Dazai appears.

He looks furious.

He's lost the jacket of his blazer, and his hair isn't neatly arranged anymore. Instead, it looks like he drove his hand through it a few million times. Dazai stares at him for a second before his brows tug into a fierce scowl. "Do you ever look at your fucking phone?!"

Chuuya huffs softly and turns away to kick off his shoes.

"Where the hell were you?" Dazai demands. "Do you even know how many people are looking for you right now?"

"Oh, boo-hoo."

It wipes the glare off Dazai's face, and even though Chuuya will need a while to stop feeling gross for almost having slept with him, this here... this feels *good.* Turning that overwhelming anger poisoning his veins into verbal punches feels *liberating*.

"Chuuya."

"What?!" he snaps. "What could you possibly have to say to me?"

"Oh, I have a lot to say, but go on —" Dazai waves towards him. "— you go first since there's clearly something on *your* chest."

"I'd rather not talk to you at all."

"You're acting like a child," Dazai has the audacity to reply. "You disappear in the middle of the party without a w—"

"*I* disappeared?!"

Dazai's mouth snaps shut for a glorious moment. Then he lets out a sigh. "Okay, that's fair. I left first. But I *returned*."

Jesus fucking christ.

Dazai's seriously going to act like he didn't leave in the first place to snuggle with his girlfriend?!

Chuuya has to swallow down breaths to even shake his head and move his limbs. He can't talk to Dazai right now, or he'll end up punching him.

"Chuu—"

"Don't."

Dazai tries to touch his wrist, but Chuuya wrenches out of his grip with a low hiss before pushing past him. "Don't fucking touch me."

So Dazai doesn't.

Chuuya somehow manages not to sleep for twelve hours but five, so it's eleven when he wakes up again, though he spends an hour lying in bed and scrolling through his phone just to avoid leaving the room and having to talk to anybody. Even the prospect of seeing Dazai again makes bile rise in his throat.

Eventually, he does get up. Chuuya doesn't want Hayashi asking any more questions than necessary, and his stomach has been grumbling with the need for food for the last half hour anyway, *so*.

The kitchen is blissfully empty. He only remembers that Hayashi mentioned she'd take the kids shopping halfway through his hangover breakfast and relaxes even more. He gets a text from Tachihara, asking if he got home safely. Chuuya debates about what to reply, then sends him a "yeah" and a thumbs-up emoji. He has finished putting away the dishes when the doorbell rings. Chuuya debates about whether to answer that, too.

It could be Hayashi and the kids. Maybe she forgot her key. He doubts it even as he goes to open the door.

It's not Hayashi.

It's the girl from yesterday.

The girl Dazai was kissing. The girl who's been in a relationship with him for ages, according to Tachihara, and also the girl that Dazai was about to cheat on — or, let's be real, probably already has.

The same girl offers Chuuya her hand with a brilliant smile and says, "Hi, I don't think we've met before. I'm Yosano."

It takes him a few seconds to get his muscle to move, accepting the outstretched hand with an expression that more likely resembles a grimace than a smile. "Chuuya Nakahara. Hey."

"I know," Yosano says with a wink before inviting herself inside.

The *click-clack* of her stilettos against the marble floor sounds like gunshots. "I've heard a lot about you, you know, so it's a pleasure to finally put a face to the name."

"Have you now?" Chuuya asks, following her to the kitchen — funny, how easy it is to feel small with a vibrant personality like that present.

"Oh, yes." Fetching a glass and a bottle of water from the fridge, Yosano shoots him a smirk. "Hayashi adores you. And Dazai..." Chuuya's pulse spikes. Dazai *what?* "Don't tell him I said that, but I think he actually likes you. And trust me, that's an accomplishment. Dazai doesn't like anybody. Well, except me."

Chuuya wordlessly reaches for the bottle, buying himself some time, and Yosano's kind enough to slide it towards him. He wasn't planning on meddling with the bastard's relationship. As shitty as it sounds, it's not his business. Not his drama. But...

Yosano's standing in front of him, telling him how *her boyfriend* likes Chuuya. He can't just stand here and pretend like Dazai wasn't about to cheat on her less than twenty-four hours ago. *Right?*

"Not sure about the *like* part, but —"

Yosano waves him off. "He yelled at about a hundred different people when you disappeared yesterday and then called his family's own staff to look for you. Where did you go, by the way?"

"To Tachihara Michizou," Dazai's voice suddenly says behind them. Now when did *he* get here?! And what part of the conversation did he hear? Dazai's gaze drills into Chuuya when he turns to stare at him.

"That's where you went off to. Isn't that right?"

"Well, hello darling," Yosano chirps, "way to make an appearance. And Tachihara, Chuuya-kun?" She whistles. "Hope you didn't let him tattoo your ass when you were drunk because been there, done that. My parents did not appreciate it."

"Oh, but I like that tattoo," Dazai drawls.

Chuuya looks between them. This whole scene — the *three* of them — should make Dazai fret, but instead, he's joking around, looking like he's watching an episode from his favorite TV show for the hundredth time.

Something feels... off.

"Where I spent the night isn't your business," Chuuya says slowly. "Can I—"

"It is when I bring you to the party," Dazai cuts in. "If you come with me, then you stay with me."

"Pretty damn hard to stay with you if you just *vanish* —"

"Sure. But if you had just waited ten minutes instead of stalking off with the first guy you find like a child throwing a temper tantrum, then you would have seen that I came back. And with good reason."

"Yeah, and what reason would that be?"

Chuuya was going to ask Dazai privately, but since he insists on doing it in front of Yosano, then they will do it in front of Yosano. Throw it all out there in the open.

Except that Dazai doesn't look nearly as alarmed as he should be. And when his gaze travels to his girlfriend, offering her a silent *go on*, she seems *amused* as she says, "Oh, he was with me. Fitzgerald was being annoying, so I needed him to play his fake boyfriend part."

Chuuya stills. He blinks.

Fake... fake what now?

"Pardon me," Chuuya murmurs, "but *what*?"

Yosano's brows tug into a frown as she turns to Dazai — the first appropriate reaction Chuuya has seen on her face today. "You didn't

tell him?"

Tell him what? That they're... fake dating?

But even as the words rumble through his mind, everything suddenly starts to make so much sense. Why Dazai didn't even try to be careful. Why he was so mad when Chuuya vanished. Why he and Yosano both look like they're really fucking enjoying themselves while Chuuya is...

He feels *so* stupid.

"It didn't come up," Dazai replies nonchalantly, and when Chuuya turns to him with a glare that could kill, he holds up his hands. "When, Chuuya, would have been the appropriate time to tell you I've been pretending to date my best friend for the last eight years, pray tell?"

"Maybe before you tried to fuck me at the *same* party where your fake girlfriend was!" Chuuya snaps.

"Oh," Yosano says, then she looks between them and nods. "*Oh*. See?" She winks at Chuuya. "I told you he likes you."

"I do not like him," Dazai says.

"He doesn't like me," Chuuya growls at the same time and then shoots him another withering glower, "or he wouldn't be getting off on making a clown out of me."

"Oh, you manage that pretty well yourself."

Chuuya shakes his head. "I fucking hate you. I've hated you from the moment I first talked to you, and I will always hate you."

"Cute." Unimpressed, Yosano picks a grape from the fruit basket on the counter. "Why make all that fuss if you knew your boy was with Tachihara, though? I never got the opportunity to try out the chocolate fountain."

"Because I *didn't* know where Chuuya was." Dazai pins him with a stare that looks collected yet is everything but. "Do you even realize how dangerous this city can be at night? The things that are out there..."

"I wasn't alone," Chuuya huffs.

"You were when you drove home."

"And how would you know that?"

"Because one phone call was enough to make Tachihara spill every single detail that happened last night. You were gone while he was still sleeping."

Something about Dazai knowing this makes him feel both crudely exposed and... well, not *proud,* but maybe a bit smug. Because yeah, Chuuya fucked Tachihara. And maybe if Dazai hadn't been such a stupid asshole withholding crucial information, it could have been *him.*

But it wasn't.

"It was five by that time," Chuuya replies, fighting back with his own glare.

"Same thing for some people."

"Who the hell cares? I'm here now. What else do you want me to say?"

"What I want is for you to get your head out of your ass."

"Seriously?" Chuuya's fragile control shatters like glass, and he grabs the collar of Dazai's shirt, ignoring the part of his brain that goes *jesus, he's tall* when he has to crane his neck to glare up at him. "I'm not going to let you insult me when this is all *your* fault!"

"How is it my fault that you jump to conclusions like it's a parkour competition?"

"Conclusions?!" Chuuya's fists ball tighter. "Tachihara *told* me you've been together *for ages*! How is that jumping to conclusions, asshole?!"

The lazy smile that stretches on Dazai's lips is infuriating. Even more so when he pries Chuuya's hands away from his collar without any effort and steps back. "Maybe you shouldn't have been stupid enough to believe someone like Tachihara then. You're both idiots."

Yosano pushes away from the counter to offer the glass of water to Dazai. "If I have to hear the word stupid one more time, I will go insane, so please, Osamu, drink and shut up for one second."

Chuuya lets out a sigh and rubs his temple. "I thought you were all friends," he tells Yosano. "Wouldn't he know that this thing between you isn't... real?"

Yosano shrugs as she leans against Dazai, who *grumpily* downs the water. "We sometimes cross circles, but he isn't actually part of the group. Not really."

"Because he is a silly little insect," Dazai adds, "who thinks that just because he's tight with Higuchi, that he's somehow close with the rest of us, too."

"Now, where does all that hate comes from?" Yosano teases, and the look she gets from him in return would be funny if it wasn't also incredibly confusing.

Chuuya has no idea what to feel. What to think. Or what to do.

Dazai's not a cheater, which is good, yes, but it makes the whole hating him thing a lot harder. Except that Chuuya doesn't have to hate him anymore... but going back to where they were before this mess started isn't an option either. Because they were *this* close to sleeping with each other last night, and now that they're both sober and at home instead of a party, it just doesn't feel right anymore. Or would it?

No.

It would have been a mistake then.

Maybe this is just the universe telling Chuuya to leave it alone.

Yosano mutters something, but Chuuya only catches Dazai pressing out an annoyed "fine" before he turns to Chuuya, shoving his hands into the pockets of his slacks. "Let's just agree that this is Ranpo's fault."

Chuuya frowns weakly. "What?"

"He saw you leaving with Tachihara, but he only told me twelve hours later because he was busy sleeping in that damn nap room."

Oh.

"Whatever," Chuuya murmurs. After so many revelations at once, he feels exhausted and drained, the lack of sleep last night finally catching up to him. He needs a nap.

"By the way," Dazai says then. "You won one of the prices."

"Ha?"

"Fitzgerald's games. You had number forty-nine, didn't you?"

"Yeah."

"Well, if you weren't stup—" A kick to his leg from Yosano makes Dazai pause and reword his sentence. "— if you still have the sticker and didn't leave it at Tachihara's, you can still claim it. Better hurry though, before Fitzgerald changes his mind."

Now, this... this is the last thing Chuuya expected to hear today, but hey. A price won is a price won. After all, he even fought for it.

In the hallway, there's the sound of the door falling open, lots of shuffling, and a pair of feet stomping away dramatically.

Hayashi and the kids must be back.

Yosano's the first out of the kitchen to greet them, which leaves him and Dazai alone for a moment. An *unbearable* moment because Chuuya doesn't know what to say. Apparently, neither does Dazai, so they both just awkwardly stare at each other before making the silent and mutual decision to follow her.

In the hallway, Hayashi is taking off her coat while animatedly talking to Yosano about something. She gets even brighter when she spots them. "Oh, Chuuya-kun is here too! I take it you had fun last night then? See, I told you! I know you probably think I'm an old, clueless lady, but I know how the youth works! A party is all you need to break the ice!"

Chuuya doesn't have the heart to tell her that the ice was not only broken but *smashed* in. Not in a good way, either.

"It was... fun," he says and deliberately avoids looking at Yosano and Dazai.

Ryuu emerges from the wardrobe, dutifully letting Yosano ruffle his hair without any complaint before asking, "Can I go now?"

"Of course, honey," Hayashi replies. "But please make sure Gin is all right. I fear she might sulk for a while."

Ryuu leaves, and Chuuya helps with the bags. "What happened with Gin?"

"Oh, we had a little... tantrum in one of the stores. She insists that she

wants to become a ballerina now."

"What's wrong with being a ballerina?" Yosano asks. "They're ho—" Catching herself, she clears her throat and says, "They're honestly... amazing."

Hayashi lets out a sigh. "I wanted to sign her up for ballet classes a year ago, but that was when she wanted to play soccer. That child changes her mind every five seconds."

"You know how kids are." Yosano follows Hayashi into the kitchen. "But hey, I can give you the name of an excellent ballet school if you want. An old friend of mine works there."

"*Friend*," Dazai echoes sarcastically.

"Yes," Yosano says tightly, "she *is*."

Somehow Dazai's mocking gaze doesn't stay on her, though, but focuses on Chuuya, who mentally spaced out of the conversation the moment the word *ballet* fell.

Chuuya never clarified what kind of *dancing* accident it was, but his pale expression is probably enough to make it easy to guess.

Ballet.

For almost eleven years, Chuuya's entire future was ballet. Until it wasn't anymore. He forces himself to exhale and snap out of it as he quietly helps to put away the groceries Hayashi bought.

"I could take her tomorrow," Dazai says.

"You would?" Hayashi asks. "Oh, Osamu. Thank you so much."

"Chuuya can come with us as well," Dazai adds then, "right?"

Chuuya, who has no idea what they're talking about, blinks. "Pardon me?"

Dazai's casual smile is dangerous. "To the ballet school. To sign up Gin for a class? Fitzgerald's office is on the way, and you still have a price to claim, right?"

"Right," Chuuya says.

Of course.

Chuuya's lying back in his bed later that day, thinking about tomorrow, when his phone buzzes with an incoming call. From *Tachihara.* He frowns but picks up anyway.

"Hello?"

"Dude," Tachihara's voice greets him. "You could have warned me about Dazai."

"Warn you about what?"

"Well, I don't know. Maybe that he's freakishly possessive of his au pair? I thought you were just living in the same house, but I had to endure a twenty-minute interrogation from him this morning."

Chuuya snorts despite himself. "He was just concerned that he'd have to explain where I am to his family."

"Yeah, no. The Dazai I know doesn't get concerned about *anything*."

But, apparently, he doesn't know Dazai well at all. Not that Chuuya mentions that. Tachihara seems too nice of a guy to deserve all this slander.

"I'll make it up to you with a drink," Chuuya replies.

The laugh that comes from the other end of the line cracks nervously. "No offense, dude, but I'm really not in the mood to piss off Dazai even more."

"It's just a drink. Why would he get mad about that?"

"I mean... I guess."

Chuuya's frown splits into a grin. "Great. So when are you free?"

They agree on a day next week, and even though Tachihara still doesn't sound entirely convinced, Chuuya hears him warm up to the idea when he mentions that he could use some professional advice for a piercing he's planning to get. Apparently, the way to a man's heart is through his passion.

Well, Chuuya doesn't want his heart. He's not stupid enough to fall in love in a country that he's going to leave again in less than a year — or just fall in love with anyone, really. But he does want Tachihara to stay in his life. If not for the fact that he's proven himself to be a

decent partner in bed, then as his *friend*. Because it's been two weeks and Chuuya's an extrovert, and spending the days with two lovely but *very* quiet kids is starting to become painfully depressing.

He goes to bed soon afterwards, desperately trying not to think about tomorrow's ballet school visit by plugging in his earphones and listening to his *happy* playlist.

It barely works.

Chapter 4: Number 49

Chapter Notes

> Good news: I finished writing this fic! Bad news: we still have 140k words to go lol

The next morning, after hitting snooze about fifteen times, Chuuya manages to wake up and go on about his usual morning routine. Wrestle the kids awake and make them eat. On their walk to school, he informs Gin that she'll be able to try out ballet later that day, and she squeals in excitement.

"I'll become the bestest ballerina of the whole wide world," she sings and jumps her next steps with her arms spread like a bird before she grabs her brother's arm. "Oni-chan, you should come too!"

Ryuu frowns over the thick scarf around his neck. "I don't want to sit around for two hours and watch you dance."

"So dance with me!"

"I don't want to dance."

"Why not?!"

"Stupid. Boys can't be ballerinas," Ryuu mutters and kicks a pebble with his foot. Diabolo happily chases it, giving the leash in Chuuya's hand a

violent tug and making him nearly topple over. Chuuya has many muscles, but when it comes to rottweilers, that apparently doesn't matter.

Grabbing Chuuya's hand, Gin scowls furiously. "Why can't boys be ballerinas?! That's unfair! I want Oni-chan to be a ballerina too!"

"Oh," Chuuya says and forces out an even smile — he's starting to think that no amount of time spent with children will make him less awkward around them, "actually, boys can dance ballet as well. It doesn't matter who you are. You just have to really, really want it."

"See!" Gin cries. "You can dance with me too! I don't want to dance all by myself!"

Ryuu's staring at Chuuya though with that sort of bewilderedness that looks way too familiar. "Really?"

"Really." He nods. "You can become anything that you want."

"Even a star?" Gin asks.

"Well, that depends on what kind of star..."

"A sparkly one!"

Chuuya's smile only falters when he sees the two of them enter the school buildings, swallowed by a crowd of other kids.

It's ridiculous. Being jealous of a child.

Yet here he is.

Maybe jealous isn't the right word because he does hope that Gin, and perhaps even Ryuu, get to discover the beauty of ballet someday. The rush of endorphins when you get into pose. The delicious stretch of your body as you move. The way you lose yourself the moment the music starts and everything — all the anger, the tension, the everyday problems — bleed into a rhythm that makes you flow through life. Yeah, he wants them to feel that someday. *He just wishes he could, too.*

The rest of his morning and lunch pass way too quickly so that by the time, Chuuya finishes a facetime call with his fathers, it's already time to put on his big boy shoes and endure both Dazai and the trip to the ballet school. He opens his door to see Dazai lifting his hand to knock and shoots him a scowl.

"Now, why do you always make that expression when you see me?" Dazai asks, following him. "I'm pretty sure my face is not that hard to look at."

"Your face isn't the problem. It's your personality."

Dazai hums, making it sound like Chuuya gave him a *compliment.* He did *not.*

In the end, Gin shows up alone, excitedly climbing into Dazai's ridiculously flashy — but sexy — black Lexus. Chuuya barely manages not to drive his hands all over the dashboard like a fucking creep, but Dazai seems to catch the awe in his eyes anyways. "A car fan, huh?"

"...maybe."

"Who knows, maybe Fitzgerald will give you one."

Chuuya isn't that lucky, but it sure would be nice. As the car comes alive with a delicious purr, he glances at Dazai. "So you don't know what I won?"

"No. He only announced them along with the winners, and I was too busy making sure you weren't somewhere dead in an alley to ask what price you got."

Crossing his arms over his chest, Chuuya looks out of the window. "If you're waiting for an apology, you won't get one."

"Apologies are useless if you continue to be a child. So as cute as it that you care so much about loyalty and cheating, please just tell me where you're going next time."

Chuuya opens his mouth to cuss him out, to tell him exactly what he thinks of *loyalty*, but the moment he sees Dazai's cool eyes slide over to him, he snaps it shut. Realizing. This isn't Dazai being a condescending asshole. This is Dazai being a *manipulative asshole* that tries to purposefully rile him up to get information out of him because reactions can be louder than words.

Dazai must see the realization bleed all over his face since he shrugs and focuses back on the road. "You make it so easy, Chuuya."

"*You...*" The only reason Chuuya doesn't go off is that Gin's in the backseat, too young to hear the insults on his tongue.

"This will be a fun year," Dazai comments idly.

Chuuya counts to ten and leaves half-moon marks on the palm of his hand with his fingernails.

A pretty awkward silence hangs in the air—at least until they arrive in front of the school and Gin starts an endless stream of excited chatter.

Chuuya honestly can't blame her. The school looks way fancier than he expected—certainly fancier than the one he started in. It shouldn't be that much of a surprise since the suggestion came from Yosano and she and the Tsushimas and pretty much everyone in their damn little circle seems to shit money. Yet Chuuya still can't help but feel startled all over again.

Gin basically drags him inside the building, and much to Chuuya's

annoyance, Dazai doesn't stay in the car. No. Of course, he follows them as well.

The foyer's just as pretty as the outside, flooded with white and golden colors and lots of light. A young woman fussing over a pinboard is kind enough to tell them where to go, and so not even two minutes later, Chuuya enters a place that he's seen a million times before, yet one that he never thought he'd be in again.

But here he is.

And it's painfully real.

The room is different enough that it shouldn't make Chuuya feel like this, the windows are placed a bit higher, and the colors seem off-kilter, but the grief that punches through him doesn't care about the details. Chuuya only hears the young woman's words that approached them when he feels a hand on his back, grounding in its gentle firmness.

"— Kouyou Ozaki. And this must be little Gin, right?"

"That's me!"

"Great. Today you can both observe and give it a try yourself. Did you bring the clothes we mentioned on the phone?"

Gin turns to him with an expectant look, and Chuuya has to remember how to speak before he answers. "Uh, yeah. Yeah, she brought them. They're in your bag, Gin."

"Lucy," Kouyou calls and waves her over. "Show Gin where she can get changed, would you?"

As the two girls leave, a polite smile dries up on Kouyou's face. The change is so sudden that it snaps Chuuya back to the present and out of his goddamn mind. Kouyou, who probably introduced herself as the dance instructor when Chuuya was busy having a silent meltdown, is tall and elegant with her red hair in a tight ponytail. When she looks at Dazai, her eyes narrow. Which makes Chuuya instantly like her.

"Dazai," she says, "I can't say that I'm happy to see you again."

"Oh, how rude. We all had so much fun back then!"

"We must have different definitions of fun."

"Mm. Speaking of, Akiko sends her regards."

If possible, Kouyou's glare runs even colder. "You can tell her to go fuck herself."

Chuuya almost chokes on his spit, covering it up with an awkward cough, and that makes Kouyou's gaze slider over to him. "You're new."

"I'm the au pair," he provides after clearing his throat.

"Okay. Well, you can stay and watch or pick up Gin later. Just don't interrupt my class."

And with that, she's off. The sound of Kouyou clapping her hands together to gather the children echoes through the room — and through Chuuya's chest. But Dazai touches his shoulder, not all too gently before his thoughts wander too far. "We're going."

"What?" Chuuya says. "We can stay. Gin probably wants us to —"

"Gin has Kouyou and fifteen other midgets to keep her company," Dazai says, guiding him out of the room. "And you will probably collapse if we stay here a minute longer."

Chuuya would argue — he will not *collapse* — but he's too tired to even do that, so he silently makes his feet move. One excruciating step after the other. Until they're outside and alone. The fresh air feels nice, and Chuuya finds himself sucking in deep breaths as he soaks up the last rays of the October sun. A hand lands on his back again.

The same hand he felt earlier.

The comforting gesture doesn't fit together with the way Dazai has treated him.

"Why are you being considerate all of a sudden," Chuuya mutters and glares at where Dazai's touching him, "when you're the one who dragged me here in the first place?"

Dazai's lashes flutter a few times. Then his hand falls away, shoved into the pocket of his ink-black coat. "You'd have to come here one way or another."

Chuuya's smile tastes like poison on his tongue. "So what, you wanted to come here with me? Hold my hand?"

"No, I thought, being a dancer yourself, you would like to come.

Forgive me for not predicting you'd have a panic attack."

"I didn't have a panic attack," Chuuya snaps, driving a hand through his hair. "I just..."

"You miss dancing."

His voice is quiet when he speaks. "Yeah."

"And you're one-hundred percent sure you can't anymore?" Dazai asks, which makes his frown deepen even more. Something the idiot seems to be talented at. "Did Akiko mention she's studying medicine? Because she is, and she's excellent at —"

"Don't you think I'd know if I could?" Chuuya shakes his head. "Jesus, it's like you want me to hate you. *I* was in the hospital. *I* spoke to the doctors. *I* am living with his, so just... just shut up."

Dazai looks like he has more to say, but for both of their sakes, he doesn't and instead nods over to his car. "We have eighty-six minutes to spare. Let's get your precious price."

Chuuya rolls his eyes, though it's mostly just for show. This day isn't exactly great, but he's sure that something filthy expensive will make up for it — at least, a little. Who knows. Maybe he did win a car. He could use it to commit vehicular manslaughter on Dazai.

Dazai pulls back onto the road, but Chuuya still feels his eyes slide over to him every so often. "Stop fucking analyzing me," he barks out eventually. "I'm not mathematical enough for you to drive us into a ditch."

"I'm not."

"Then what are you doing?!"

"Thinking of something to tell you."

"Ha?"

"The scale between us is so unbalanced I'm considering giving you something in return. Just so it stops looking so poorly for you."

Chuuya huffs out a breath. The sheer audacity. "I don't want anything from you."

"How mature of you. Now ask a question. Anything." Dazai flicks a

finger towards him. "One piece of dirty laundry for another."

Even if Dazai's annoying — probably the most annoying person he's ever met, Chuuya still feels a handful of timid curiosity stir inside his chest. Here Dazai is, offering a piece of his complicated, guarded self. Chuuya would be an idiot to refuse, right? "Fine," he says with a sigh and crosses his arms. There a lot of things he'd like to know, but there's one question that comes to his mind first. "Why are you pretending to date Yosano?"

The unimpressed look on Dazai's face screams that he's disappointed with him for asking something so... trivial when he could have gone straight for the throat... *but.*

"I mean," Chuuya starts, "I'd get it if you told your parents you have a girlfriend to get them off your back. Sort of. To be honest, I always assumed that whole fake dating thing was just a trope used in cheesy rom-com movies. But you said you've been doing it for eight years.

That's a long time."

Dazai's silent for a moment, steering the car on the freeway. "My father and her parents are business partners. Our relationship started as a business arrangement when we were kids and probably will always be one."

Except that Dazai doesn't seem like the type of person to be pushed around by his parents.

"But didn't you ever get... lonely?" Chuuya finds himself asking, genuinely confused. Eight years of fake dating means eight years of no actual relationship. No introducing your high school sweetheart to your family. Certainly no broken hearts from your first shitty love.

"Oh, I wasn't ever lonely," Dazai chuckles. "It did make me into an excellent liar, though. And a fake relationship didn't ever stop us from some fun ourselves."

Oh.

"Would it have bothered you?" Dazai asks then.

Chuuya has a vague idea of what he's talking about, but he's not about to make a fool of himself for the nth time, so, leaning his elbow against the window, he dutifully asks, "Would *what* have bothered me?"

"Akiko. If I had told you before you heard what you heard from Tachihara," Dazai calmly elaborates. "Would it have bothered you? Would you have stayed?"

And even though Chuuya knew it was coming, the beating heart inside his chest still seems to spike at that. "Yeah," he answers. "Even if it's fake. To others, it would have looked a lot differently. I don't want to be the dirty mistress you fuck while your pretend girlfriend looks the other way. And I'm certainly not a side piece."

Dazai nods.

The strange game of truth they've been playing ends.

Fitzgerald's office is on the other side of the city, located in a tall building right on the side of a busy shopping promenade. Chuuya starts to feel underdressed when they step into the elevator and get a good look at themselves in the mirror, showcasing both their difference in clothes and height. Next to Dazai's coat, razor-sharp suit, and tie, Chuuya looks like a rebellious teenager in his leather jacket and docs.

But oh well. He might as well make it look good.

Chuuya straightens his spine when the doors slide open with a ding and follows Dazai to the office at the end of the hall. The young man sitting at the reception doesn't even get spared a glance.

"Fitzgerald," Dazai says, greets. "I brought you number forty-nine."

Everything about Fitzgerald screams filthy rich — well, everything except his face. Compared to everyone else Chuuya's met so far, he just looks like a plain, blonde guy. With wrinkles. And a dreadful grin.

"The infamous number 49. I was wondering whether you'd show up."

"Here I am," Chuuya says. "Can I get my price?"

"I should have guessed that everything to do with Dazai would be just as ill-mannered as him, but..." Fitzgerald opens a drawer, getting out an envelope that he lays on his desk. "The sticker for your price."

Chuuya unceremoniously slaps the sticker on the desk and grabs the envelope, though he doesn't open it yet, just holding it onto it tightly.

"Aren't you going to open it?" Fitzgerald asks, leaning back in his seat.

"I wasn't planning to."

Even though he feels Dazai stiffen slightly next to him, what he says is, "Oh, we didn't come here for small talk, Fitz."

"Of course. I look forward to seeing you at the charity gala next month." Dazai and Chuuya both turn to leave, but it doesn't stop Fitzgerald from speaking. "Though I hope you will cause less of a ruckus next time. I don't enjoy my guests being yelled at."

"And I don't enjoy a single thing about you," Dazai says with a wave. "Goodbye."

Once they're in the elevator, Chuuya finally glances at the envelope in his hands. "You're not going to start crying, are you?" Dazai asks from his side.

"I hope I won a gun," Chuuya mutters with a roll of his eyes before tearing into the paper.

There are several things inside. A brochure. A letter. And two tickets.

Chuuya's eyes fly over the text several times before he gets the gist of it. It's a trip to a 5-star resort in Fuji, including full access to the spa area, tickets to a horse-back riding trip, several museums, and bungee-jumping.

All for two people.

"Wow," he says.

Dazai's not even tactful enough to ask for the papers; he just brushes Chuuya aside and reads it for himself before huffing out a soft, amused sound that makes Chuuya shiver involuntarily. "Cute."

"Shut up," he automatically says. "I'm an au pair. Can I even go on a trip like that?"

"You're entitled to four weeks of vacation, so yes. You can."

"Have you ever been there?"

Dazai looks over his shoulder with a smirk as he walks to his car. "To Fuji? No. Why, are you planning to take me there?"

Chuuya slams the door shut to emphasize *how much he doesn't* want to do that.

Leaning against his seat, he crosses his arms and reads over the brochure again, picturing himself enjoying a full-body massage while he's sipping a cocktail. *Nice*. "Maybe I'll take Tachihara," he throws out there just because he feels like being difficult. "I should ask him when I see him next week."

"Mm, maybe you will." Though out of Dazai's mouth, it sounds like *no, you won't, and we both know it*, and some stupid, horny part of Chuuya delights in it. The rational part just sighs and prepares for a long year ahead.

When they pick Gin up, she tells them that she wants to come back next week (and the two hundred weeks after that, too). This means Chuuya will have to as well. Just like Dazai said. Maybe Chuuya is glad that he went there today. Sort of. Sure, he did have a silent meltdown, but that means he won't have one next time. And hopefully, someday, it will be like getting Ryuu to his violin lessons. Just another place.

Dazai's already disappeared somewhere inside the house by the time Chuuya gets out of his docs and wanders into the kitchen to check what's for dinner. He's honestly not sure what it is that the cooks left on the stove, but it looks and smells delicious.

After eating with the kids and helping Ryuu with his maths homework, Chuuya is pretty surprised when Dazai's father intercepts him on his way to his room. "Nakahara-kun. A word?"

It's rare to see him around the house, let alone have Tshushima speak to him. Privately. His mind's already racing with a thousand possible scenarios as he follows the man into his office.

He's going to get fired.

Someone noticed how awkward he is around the kids.

Dazai tattled on him, after all.

Chuuya remains standing while Tsushima sits down and braces himself for the worst-case scenario.

"How do you like it here?"

Hah?

"It's... been great."

"The birthday celebration you went to," Tsushima says and leans back in his seat, driving a hand across his jaw. Chuuya's heart drops. "I heard that my son had to look for you."

This is it.

Goodbye Yokohama.

Goodbye being an au pair.

"I want to apologize for his behavior."

"What?" Chuuya says, a bit dazed.

Tsushima moves, grabbing two glasses and a bottle of scotch from the cabinet next to his desk before pouring himself one — and one for Chuuya, apparently. "Do you drink?"

"Occasionally."

"Here." Tsushima slides it towards him, and Chuuya accepts it, fingers wrapping tightly around the glass but not lifting it to his mouth. "My son's behavior can be very eccentric," the man starts again. "I apologize for whatever he did to you. I will make sure that it never happens again."

What?

"I don't really follow," Chuuya says. "Dazai didn't do anything. It was a... misunderstanding." He can't, and he shouldn't put himself into a compromising position to defend Dazai, but this feels *wrong*.

However, Tsushima doesn't really seem to hear him. "All that boy does is cross boundaries, but that's not how my family works." He takes a sip of his drink. "If you need me to step in, you can come to me anytime."

Chuuya's about to say something — something that will make Dazai seem less like a devil and more like the nuanced jerk he is when Tsushima slides over a couple of bills.

"Uh... what's this?"

"For the cab ride, you had to pay. And an apology."

"Sir, I really don't—"

Tsushima's phone rings, and he gives Chuuya a nod that basically says *goodbye*. "You can keep the drink. And close the door behind you."

Leaving the office, Chuuya feels dirty. Sorting out his issues with Dazai himself is one thing, but having his father doing it for him? That feels childish. Not satisfying whatsoever.

As he lies in bed that night listening to his sleeping playlist, he wonders what he cost Dazai. His relationship with his father already seemed distant before, but now it looks even grimmer, and Chuuya *hates* that he's now partly responsible for that.

Chapter 5: I Could Be Your Friend

Chapter Notes

warnings:
- implied physical & emotional abuse

Chuuya doesn't get a chance to talk to Dazai since he doesn't seem to be at home whenever Chuuya's around. It is as unsettling as it is relieving. What the hell is he even supposed to say? *I'm sorry I caused you even more problems with your father because I saw you kissing someone and went home with a stranger instead of confronting you about it?*

It seems silly. And Dazai doesn't seem like the type to care about something like apologies. They're just words.

When Chuuya does finally catch him in front of the coffee machine, almost five days after the visit to the ballet school and that awful conversation with his father, Dazai has new bandages. Around his left eye, of all places.

"What did you do?" Chuuya asks, frowning at it.

"I tripped and fell down the stairs," Dazai replies and grabs his cup before pouring an unholy amount of sugar in it.

"And injured your eye?"

"Well, you see, there was this very sharp edge."

"Dazai."

"Don't make that face, Chuuya. It doesn't look pretty on you."

His father didn't... did he?

The thought alone makes Chuuya nauseous, and Dazai's insistence on talking around in circles like the local court jester isn't helping.

"Can you stop fucking around?" he snaps.

At least, Dazai stops grinning. "Get that stick out of your ass, chibi." He shrugs. "Sometimes the people at university like to throw balls and catch them for entertainment. As you can see, it's very dangerous."

Some of Chuuya's muscles unclench. "You got it from sports?"

"I could illustrate it for you if it's too hard to imagine," Dazai jokes and takes a step forward to pokes Chuuya's cheek. "Just give me your face and a ball."

"I'm fine," Chuuya replies curtly, busying himself with putting some of the dishes away, "thanks."

"Suit yourself ~"

He only stops fussing when Dazai disappears behind the corner.

Chuuya feels like he's swallowing rocks.

Could Dazai have been lying? Absolutely. Could Chuuya be freaking out just because of what Tsushima said a few days ago? Totally.

The idea that Dazai's father could have done that feels absurd. He's a distant and strict man, yeah, but surely he wouldn't do shit like this, right? Especially not when a guest lives with them. It's too obvious. It's absurd.

Right?

But it could be.

Chuuya can't just look away because he thinks Dazai's father is not shitty enough to be abusive. He could ask Dazai, yeah, but he doubts he'd get any sort of clear answer out of him. He could ask Hayashi, but that could be overstepping the line.

In the end, he can't really do anything but... wait and see, which he loathes with every burning cell in his body. It feels too much like looking away. And having lived the first seven years of his life in the system, Chuuya knows what's it like when the people around you close their eyes because they're uncomfortable. Because there's not enough evidence. Or to wait and see.

Piece by piece, it ruins you.

On Saturday, Chuuya meets Tachihara for that promised drink. He apologizes for the interrogation that happened because of him. After two beers, Tachihara has already forgotten about it, happily showing him pictures of the tattoos he did in the past.

Tachihara's fun in a dorky sort of way, easy to talk to, and he shares valuable insider knowledge on the best gyms in the city with him, which basically makes them best friends. He also introduces Chuuya to the bizarre man that works the bar, a guy who's really into lemons.

Even though Chuuya truly did come here for friendship, he still ends up getting shoved against the wall of a shabby storage room. He's been stressed lately, and this helps. So what.

Chuuya's pretty sure Tachihara is taking this as seriously as him, so he doesn't waste any more time than necessary overthinking it while he takes the subway home later that night.

Dazai is once again a rare sight at home.

Hayashi assures him that's his classes are keeping him busy, seemingly amused by Chuuya's apparent concern, but he can't stop thinking about Tsushima's words and the bandages around Dazai's eye. It keeps him up at night, distracted throughout the day.

So much that he only realizes he's taking Gin to the ballet school when he gets into the car that will take them there — Hayashi's orders. Chuuya should really start looking into getting an international license. He wants to be behind the wheel, not getting chauffeured around.

It's still odd to enter the huge dancing room and not see his old trainer, waiting for him with a coffee in one hand and a camera in the other, but he doesn't break into pieces this time. He considers that a step forward. A tiny one, though, at least, in the right direction.

The house is rarely full except for Sundays — and then only for breakfast and dinner, but Mondays are the quietest. Hayashi and Tsushima are at work, Dazai god knows where, and Ryuu taking violin lessons a few blocks away. Chuuya still feels awkward spending more time than necessary outside his or the children's room, but on days like this... he spreads out on the couch in the ginormous living room and watches whatever is running on TV.

Today life has other plans. He hears the door fall open and shut not even ten minutes into it. Chuuya glances up from his phone to see Dazai come to a stop when he notices him, a bemused smirk on his face. "Hard at work?"

"Yup," he says, though he's a bit busy staring at the lack of bandages around Dazai's eyes. They're gone. His eye looks fine. Well, it does

now.

Who knows what it looked like a week ago. Chuuya considers his options and makes a silent decision, offering Dazai a hesitant smile. "Want to join me?"

If Dazai's surprised, he doesn't show it. He leaves a considerable space between them when he falls down on the couch, stretching his arms over his head and letting out a deep breath. Even with all those inches between them, Chuuya feels like the room has grown ten times smaller, Dazai's presence effortlessly drowning out everything else. He hates that Dazai has that effect on him. It's annoying.

"So, how was your date with Tachihara?" Dazai asks.

Chuuya crosses his arms. "It wasn't a date."

"Wasn't it?"

"No," he mutters. "We're friends. Apparently, these are hard to come by here."

Dazai gazes at him in silent protest. "I could be your friend."

"Really?" Chuuya snorts as he holds his stare with an incredulous expression of his own. "Somehow I'm having trouble believing that."

"I am an excellent friend. Ask anyone."

"All your friends kept saying that they haven't seen you in ages."

"Okay, then ask Akiko."

"So you have *one* friend."

"Quality over quantity, chibi," Dazai tells him like they're in a lecture about product management.

"Fine." Chuuya braces an elbow against the couch and gives him a shrug. "If you insist. Be my friend."

"Great."

"Awesome. So when are you free?"

Dazai raises a brow.

"You know that thing friends do?" Chuuya tries. "Hanging out?"

"Chuuya wants to hang out with me?"

"I want to hang out with *somebody*. It just so happens that you offered."

The looks that he gets is a *sure you don't* one.

Pretty bold for a guy with one friend.

Dazai checks the date on his phone before glancing at him. A loose strand of hair sticks out at the back of his head, making him look funny. "I was planning to go to town tomorrow. Want to join me?"

"Yeah," Chuuya says. "Sure. Okay."

"Are you really trying to tell me you've never played the sims?"

"Yes."

"That's impossible." Chuuya shoots Dazai a disbelieving look. "Everyone has played the sims at least once in their life."

Dodging some guy that's in a rush, Dazai holds up a finger. "Improbable."

Then he smiles, clearly amused. "I don't know what you want me to tell you. I never played it. I've heard of it, yes, but I've never, not once, sat down and thought to myself *Oh, I'd like to create a fake family and make them live in pixel houses.* Frankly, it sounds boring."

"Then you clearly missed out," Chuuya announces, shaking his head. "It's about so much more than building houses or whatever you think it is. It's about playing god. You can let your sims just swim in a pool for ten hours until they die of thirst and exhaustion."

"Oh, wow. That pretty head of yours is even darker than I thought it was."

Chuuya scowls when the idiot pokes him in the head. "You'll have to try it out one day."

"Mmm."

There aren't many things Chuuya's sure about. For instance, *this* here.

They're strolling through the city and talking to each other like civilized people. As if they're actually friends. As if Chuuya didn't want to throttle him less than two weeks ago. And somehow, it's less awkward than he expected it to be, and, kind of, fun. So yeah, life is weird and full of surprises, but Chuuya's one hundred percent sure that he will make Dazai play the sims one day. Maybe he can get it for his birthday. Or, for Christmas in two months.

Dazai's phone buzzes, and he holds it to his ear. "Hey — yeah, I'm actually close — no idea — okay —" Lifting his hand, he takes a look at the gold watch around his wrist. "— give me five minutes."

A moment later, Chuuya feels Dazai's hand on his shoulder, steering him into an alley. "Small change of plans."

"Who are we meeting?"

"Akiko."

"Oh."

"She just needs to give me something. It won't take long," Dazai says. "I think."

"I don't mind," Chuuya tells him with a shrug that hopefully doesn't look all too pathetic. "Aside from that whole, you know, thing, she was pretty cool."

"Oh, she is. She's a treasure."

They're supposed to meet at a small coffee shop with a pug logo on the vitrine, though Yosano arrives two minutes after them with an iced coffee and a marvelous smirk, looking like a picture-perfect princess that stepped straight out of a fashion magazine. Last time, Chuuya was distracted, but now he gets to take in every single detail.

Yosano greets Dazai with a hug and a cheek on the kiss, then does the same with Chuuya. She smells really nice, too. After taking a step back, she raises her brows. "You didn't mention you're bringing the French boy."

"He needs friends," Dazai says.

"Ah."

Chuuya shoots him a scowl before turning back to Yosano. "It's nice to

see you again."

"You're not such a bad sight either," she tells him with a wink before motioning between them. "So did you two — ?"

Oh.

Oh no.

"I need friends," Chuuya echoes in a blurt. "Just friends. Nothing more."

"And he doesn't want to be a dirty mistress," Dazai adds next to him, ever so helpful.

Yosano looks very unimpressed by what she hears and takes a sip of her iced coffee before nodding towards a free table inside. "Let's sit down. I feel like so much happened in the last week. I don't even know where to start. And I need another coffee."

They order hot drinks, and Chuuya studies more of the menu while only half-listening to whatever Yosano's talking about since he doesn't get most of it anyway. He only catches words like *Mori* and scrunchy business and *Ozaki.*

Ozaki, he does know, though.

It's Gin's ballet teacher. Kouyou Ozaki.

"I'm annoyed she's annoyed because she shouldn't be annoyed," Yosano says, glaring at her steaming cup of coffee. "You need to talk to her."

"Kiko, she likes me even less than you," Dazai informs her, though judging by her look, it's not exactly new information.

Yosano lets out a low, annoyed sound in the back of her throat and taps her long fingernails against the table as she leans into her palm. "Anyways. What are we doing for Halloween?" Surprisingly, she turns to Chuuya. "What do you and your friends do for Halloween? Do you really go from house to house and demand candy? Because that's pretty weird."

Chuuya chuckles into his cup. If she says it like that, trick or treating does sound bizarre. "Only as kids," he says, "and I never did."

"How come?"

"I didn't exactly have the chance to do it before getting adopted, and afterwards, I guess I already felt too old." Dazai doesn't say anything, but his eyes on Chuuya feel like scorching brandmarks. So before he can reveal any more personal stuff that the bastard can use for his stupid games, he steers the conversation towards safer grounds. "Sometimes, my friends threw parties, and we all dressed up. That's it."

Yosano makes a deep humming noise, nodding. "Maybe I should throw one."

"Here," Dazai slides his phone towards her. "*Motion blue* is having a Halloween-themed night."

"What's that?" Chuuya asks.

"A club."

"A very good club," Yosano adds, waggling her brows before leaning back in her seat and holding a chest to her hand. "Thank god. I hate throwing parties."

Dazai's gaze finds Chuuya's, and he cocks his head. "So, up for another party?" he asks, voice soft and amused. "They take costumes very seriously, though."

Chuuya huffs. As long as it doesn't end up like last time, he's pretty much open to anything.

The rest of the week is uneventful. Dazai's busy with school, so not much around, but when he is, they chat — it's 95% bickering — which is nice. Chuuya tries out the gym Tachihara told him about. Diabolo gets a stomach bug and pukes on the floor of the living room.

A week before Halloween, there's a knock on Chuuya's door, and when he opens, Dazai's standing in front of it and holding up the sims.

"Oh my god," Chuuya all but gasps out. "You bought it?!"

"I was buying a flash stick, and then I saw it out of the corner of my eye and..."

Dazai gives him a shrug.

Chuuya ushers him inside and starts setting up the game on the computer while giving him a brief overview of the basics. When it's

finished loading, Dazai takes his seat at the desk and...

The sight is comical.

Dazai, wearing a sharp black suit that probably cost ten times the game, frowning at the sims on the computer screen. It really is a picture worth more than a billion.

Chuuya mainly lies around on his bed, occasionally providing comments as Dazai creates his family. They've been at it for a good hour when Chuuya's phone starts buzzing with an incoming facetime call from his parents. He's so used to taking their calls that he doesn't even think about it, finger immediately pressing to accept it.

He only remembers that Dazai's still in the room when his screen fills with the familiar sight of his two dads from the most unflattering angle ever. Chuuya can't help but grin. They're such dorks with technology.

"Hey," he says, switching to French, and praying Dazai will have the decency to shut up and stay silent.

"Chuuya? Can you hear us?"

"Yeah, I can hear you. Loud and clear."

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Dazai turn around in the chair.

"How are you?" Arthur asks. "Are they feeding you well?"

"Yeah, dad," Chuuya dutifully says. "They are. Actually, we had that dish you tried that one time? No offense, but it was so much better."

He sees Paul jokingly elbow Arthur before grinning into the camera. "Your father's an awful cook. I keep trying to tell him but —"

Chuuya has no time to register, let alone do anything before Dazai's suddenly next to him, squeezing himself into the frame and saying, in flawless French, "Hi, I'm Dazai Osamu. Your son's host brother."

Who the hell voluntarily talks to someone's family on the phone?!

No one.

No fucking one, except apparently, Dazai.

His fathers wave into the camera, and both start speaking at the same

time, the connection lagging somewhat.

"Oh, we've heard so much about you!"

"It's nice to finally meet you!"

"Have you now?" Dazai drawls before shooting Chuuya glance. "You talk about me a lot?" he asks in Japanese.

"Shut up," he hisses back, fighting the flush on his neck, "you're part of the family. Of course, I had to mention you!" Then he turns back to his fathers.

"I was just showing Dazai how to play sims. That's all."

"The simps?" Arthur echoes with a frown. "Is that the animation series with the yellow people?"

"No, that's the Simpsons, dad. I'm talking about — you know what, never mind. We're just gaming."

"Don't game too much," Paul tells him with a conspiring wink. "Or you'll get a headache, and we're not here to give you a little —"

"Okay," Chuuya exclaims. "I have to go now! Bye!"

"It was nice meeting you," Dazai hurries to say from the side, but

Chuuya has already cut the connection.

A loud silence descends over the room, only the quiet background music from the sims playing.

"You know," Chuuya eventually huffs, "you could have just continued playing."

"Now, where would be the fun in that?"

He elbows the idiot.

"They seem nice," Dazai says then, voice quiet, almost sad.

Chuuya leans his chin on his folded arms. "They are."

"Do you have any siblings?"

"Nah. They weren't even sure about kids, but apparently meeting the

seven-year-old with anger issues changed their minds."

He's not sure why he's telling Dazai this, why he's answering all of his questions instead of kicking him out of his room and stopping it before Dazai knows too much. Maybe because he doesn't want to stop it.

They're friends now, right? And that's what friends do. They talk.

Three days before the Halloween party, Chuuya still hasn't found anything to wear. He's been googling and looking through Pinterest, but everything he's seen so far didn't impress him.

He might ask Dazai. After this dreadful dinner with the whole family around the table.

Chuuya likes Hayashi. A lot. The kids, too. And Dazai is... Dazai. But Tsushima seems to suck out all the breathable out of the room every time he's present.

Chuuya has been watching him and Dazai, trying to see what's going on, but there's nothing to see since they rarely talk. Dazai only speaks when Hayashi's questions basically force him to, and then only, in short, cut-off sentences, which is highly odd to witness since the Dazai Chuuya knows loves to hear himself talk. Everything about it just feels off.

Hayashi manages to wrestle out of them that they're going to a Halloween party in a few days and insists on making that the topic.

"What are you going to wear?" she asks Dazai. "Are you going to match with Yosano again? Oh, I still have the pictures from a few years ago. You looked so lovely together."

Dazai takes a sip of his wine before setting it down and clearing his throat. "Actually, I have something to share." He slides a finger down the length of his glass, almost lazily. "Akiko and I broke up."

Chuuya nearly chokes on his noodles.

It gets so quiet, he feels like the harsh huff of breath his lungs release is the loudest sound in the world.

Dazai's gaze drifts to him. Heavy.

But Chuuya can't even return the stare, eyes immediately darting to

Tsushima. *The relationship was basically business.* That's what Dazai told him about him and Yosano, right? Business between their parents. This means he just gave his father another reason to be angry, another opportunity to possibly lash out and hurt him.

Chuuya's fingers clench into painful fists under the table.

Tsushima wipes his mouth with a napkin before sparing his son an unreadable look. "What happened?"

"The answer is what didn't happen," Dazai says with a shrug, "which is everything. I'm not going to marry someone who isn't in love with me."

"Love," his father scoffs. "Love is something you can reserve for the affairs you f—"

"Gen'emon," Hayashi snaps.

"If it's something as frivolous as that, you can still fix it. And I suggest you do. That girl is the key to an empire, and since you don't put in the work yourself, you rely on her."

Dazai leans back in his chair and stretches his arms over his head with a show. "Good thing that I don't care about that empire then, no?"

Tsushima stands up from the table, the chair screeching against the floor, but his gaze is cold, more disappointed than angry or mad.

Chuuya lets out a sigh as Hayashi goes on to fuss over Dazai.

Why would Dazai end the pretend relationship with Yosano all of sudden? Last he saw them, everything was fine. He doubts anything has changed about them being best friends. So why?

Not because of Chuuya, right?

Because that's a bit much — way too much for one failed attempt at hooking up weeks ago.

Dinner obviously doesn't last much longer after that, and when Dazai leaves the table, Chuuya follows him, catching up with him in the hallway.

"Dazai."

"Hm?"

"What are you doing?"

Dazai turns around, cocking his head. "Excuse me?"

"Why did you end it? It's not because of... what I said that one time, right?"

The laugh that comes out of Dazai is an ugly thing, terrible and mocking, and Chuuya would be offended if he wasn't so bewildered. "Oh, Chuuya. Although I do find that angry frown of yours adorable, and although I wouldn't mind fucking it out of you if you asked, that's all there is to it." Dazai delivers the speech so nonchalantly, it takes a few moments until the words register. "You were never part of the equation when we made that decision."

It's what Chuuya wanted to hear. That this isn't some silly attempt to rehash their almost hook up.

Really.

But Chuuya would be lying if he said it didn't bruise his ego at least a little bit. Everything about this is humiliating. So fucking humiliating.

"Good," he presses out, faking a smirk that feels like the grimace of a stupid clown. "Because it never would have worked anyway." Chuuya brushes past Dazai without waiting for an answer, taking a moment to bask in the sheer embarrassment once the door's safely locked.

"You're fine," he murmurs to himself after a few moments. "You're an idiot, but you're fine."

Flopping on his bed and taking out his phone, he distracts himself by looking for more Halloween inspiration. He needs something that isn't only a good idea but also that looks *hot*.

So hot that a certain bastard will regret ever saying these words.

Chapter 6: The Angel And The Devil

Chapter Notes

> i know i've been horrible with updating TSOP but ahh writing & editing have been very hard for me lately :") i will try my best though
>
> warnings for this chapter:
> - alcohol
> - explicit sexual content

In the end, it's a series of very spontaneous decisions. He discovers a very niche shop in the city that sells various unconventional clothes, up to and including Halloween costumes. There, he finds *it*.

Gorgeous, obscenely tight, and 100% sure to make every single head within a 10-mile-radius turn.

It's also very daring.

Now, don't get him wrong; back at home, Chuuya overcame issues such as gender norms a long time ago. Not only did his father make sure to teach him a lot about queer history, stereotyping, and heteronormativity, but he also danced ballet for eleven years of his life. Doing that without learning how to blend out what others think of you is impossible.

But this is a bit different.

Chuuya's not with his family and friends. He's going to be with *Dazai and his friends*. And even though he's sure that the majority of them wouldn't be dicks about it, he doesn't like surprises — especially shitty ones.

So, while looking at himself in the mirror of the changing room, Chuuya makes a decision. He takes out his phone and finds Yosano on Instagram in less than two minutes, shooting her a message.

C: Okay, I know this is random, but I'm trying on fits for tomorrow & I need you to tell me if this is too much

C: [attached image]

The attached image in question is him, wearing the black angel

costume in latex — well, fallen angel probably, but hey, he's an angel nonetheless. It covers his entire upper body but cuts off at the thighs like a bodysuit, revealing miles and miles of his bare legs. There's also a nice pair of wings at his back.

It's hot, it really is, and if it were possible, he'd probably go ahead and fuck himself, but since it's not, he has to rely on others to do that.

His phone buzzes with a reply not even thirty seconds later. Then again, and again, and again.

Y: Oh my god

Y: BABE

Y: DARLING

Y: I don't know whether I want to fuck you or be you right now

C: so I can wear that?

Y: If you don't, I will sneak into your room tonight and feed you knives. And then I'm stealing the outfit

Y: Where is it from btw

The price is hefty, but since Tsushima gave him money for the cab ride, Chuuya's bank account doesn't look as bad as he thought it would. Besides, the reaction of a certain bastard will make *every single note* worth it.

He leaves the shop with a static buzzing through his veins.

The next day, Dazai texts him that he should be ready by eleven. Chuuya hasn't seen him around lately — probably, a side-effect of the break-up.

Relieved is currently next door at their neighbor's birthday party and that Tsushima only comes home around midnight, Chuuya can saunter his way through the house without any distractions whatsoever when he gets a message from Dazai saying he's waiting in the foyer.

The first thing he notices or rather *hears* is that Yosano is there with him.

The second, that Dazai's wearing a fucking devil costume — a silky red shirt with several buttons undone — though they only reveal more

bandages around his chest — and a pair of plastic horns on his head.

It's kind of cliche, but it also makes them *match* — by courtesy of Yosano, he's sure.

Oh, and the third thing is that when Dazai's eyes land on him as he obliviously steers toward the kitchen, saying something to Yosano... he runs into the door frame.

Actually, head-against-the-frame runs into it.

Chuuya literally hears his skull crack.

"Oh, Jesus." Yosano's immediately by his side, snapping her fingers in front of his face. "Can you still see? Are you nauseous?"

"I'm *fine*," Dazai grits out with a groan and makes a vague hand gesture, pointing somewhere between Chuuya and the kitchen. "I just —"

"Yeah, *you just,*" Yosano parrots him, and try as hard as he wants, Chuuya bursts out into unrestrained laughter. It makes Dazai glare, although upon glancing at Chuuya again, his eyes immediately raise to the ceiling as if asking for strength.

Chuuya grins. "For a devil, you're quite clumsy."

"And for an angel, you're not really nice."

"*Fallen* angel," Chuuya corrects.

Shaking his head with a little sigh, Dazai dusts off his shirt and nods at the door. "We're going."

As they trail after him, Chuuya shoots Yosano a look. "Do I even want to know who gave him the idea to go as the devil?"

"It looks like you already do, darling," Yosano replies and punches his shoulder when he rolls his eyes. "Trust me, I did you two a favor."

"So far, all you gave Dazai is a head concussion."

"Ah, details."

Chuuya's not surprised anymore when he sees a limousine waiting in front of the house, but that doesn't stop him from admiring it for a second.

"We're picking up a few people," Yosano explains when she notices his look.

"Obviously, "Chuuya says with a nod.

Back at home, he and his friends squeezed themselves on the four-seaters in the subway when they went somewhere; none of them having nearly enough money for a car, let alone a limousine.

It's a nice change in routine, Chuuya supposes.

Yosano fishes out a bottle of champagne out of the fridge — *because there is a fridge* — as soon as they're inside and seated. Music starts playing over the speakers, and combined with the fancy seats, the purple neon-lighting, and the TVs, he feels like he landed in an episode of *Keeping Up With The Kardashians.*

"Let's toast," Yosano exclaims, raising her glass, "to a night that hopefully will end without you —" her gaze slides to Chuuya — "running off somewhere without telling anyone, and you —" she looks at Dazai "— being a ginormous asshole to people."

"Cheers," Dazai drawls.

Yeah, cheers to that.

It can't end up in a disaster like last time — it won't. Because *this time*, Chuuya and Dazai are sorts of friends, and *this time*, there are no more secrets between them that are able to cause explosive drama.

Some harmless fun.

That's all Chuuya wants tonight.

They pick up Ranpo, who's dressed as the sexified version of *the Cheshire cat* from *Alice in wonderland*. (It's at this point that Chuuya realizes his concerns about being too much were, in fact, futile.) Kunikida shows up in a *Thor* costume, Tanizaki as... *Hercules*? The last person that piles into the car is Higuchi, wearing her hair in two red- and blue-colored pigtails and a matching *Harley Quinn* outfit.

Or, Chuuya thought she'd be the last to join. A few minutes later, the car stops again. Not in front of a club, but a tall building complex. When the doors open, two guys, Chuuya hasn't met yet, climb inside. Both of them obnoxiously tall. One of them sporting short, dark-red hair and a scruff; the other one black hair and glasses, both in Harry

Potter robes. Chuuya figures they're *Harry* and *Ron*. Their names are Oda and Ango, though it takes Chuuya several minutes to figure out who is who in the wake of the loud, chaotic whooping and yelling inside the limousine.

By the time they arrive at the club, Chuuya's tipsy with champagne and the energy of reckless young people. The club is packed. Chuuya sees people wearing all kinds of costumes, from *Sailor Moon* to someone in an avocado suit.

Dazai's people have a lounge reserved for them, but this time Chuuya's actually glad about the extra breathing room, the crowd inside making it hard to take one single step without invading someone else's space. It gets pretty annoying after two minutes. There's an extra bar for the VIP guests, so to speak, too, and no one hesitates to start ordering more.

Chuuya's been chatting to Ranpo for the last ten minutes, yet he can't help but notice Dazai talk animatedly to Oda on the other side of the bar. There's a smile on his face, and it's startingly unfamiliar in its genuineness.

It looks like he has more than one friend, after all.

Chuuya tears his eyes away, trying to focus on what's Ranpo telling him, something about a ski trip to Switzerland, but his mind stays glued on the topic of *Dazai*.

Considering Dazai hasn't really spared him any words or glances, almost as if avoiding him, Chuuya's outfit must have accomplished the exact opposite of his goal. But hey, Dazai not being annoying for a night is good too, right?

Because that thing that's been blazing between them ever since that birthday party screams *messy*. So does everything else about Dazai. Chuuya doesn't want messy. He wants easy. *Simple*.

And yet despite it all, he still can't seem to stay away from Dazai. Every time Dazai backs off, Chuuya wants him back in his space, and every time he comes too close, Chuuya's alarm bells go off like wailing sirens, demanding as much distance as possible.

Chuuya despises the effect Dazai has on him — that burning ice or freezing fire type of thing that leaves him craving more no matter what happens.

After drinks and even more drinks, someone suggests going dancing, and Chuuya's drunk enough not to get hung up on that little word for once, his limbs craving to do something.

On the dancefloor and later on the way to the bathroom, Chuuya gets about a hundred compliments on his costume and replies just as enthusiastically as the drunk girls talking to him before Yosano drags him back to the dancing area. He's not sure *how* and *why* the topic comes up, but at some point, Yosano's yelling into his ear. "*I* wanted to end the fake relationship!"

Everything around them is so loud that they have to hold onto each other to understand anything.

"*But why?*" Chuuya yells back.

"There's something I want and —" A girl bumps into them, then stumbles away. "— and I can't have it with a fake boyfriend on my side!"

"Something?"

Yosano's drunk enough to make a face.

Not something. *Someone.*

Fifty slurred, over-the-top-emotional words later, Chuuya finds himself pushing through the crowd towards the bar to get himself water. The lounge seems miles away, and he's dying of thirst.

"Having fun?"

He blames the alcohol for the way his face lights up with a grin when he looks up to see Dazai next to him. "More than you!" he exclaims, elbowing him. "What are you doing here all by yourself?"

"Oh, I'm having plenty of fun."

"You'd be having more with us."

Chuuya momentarily breaks eye contact to order water, then turns back to Dazai, not being subtle at all about appreciating the view. Dazai's hair is messy, his shoulders broad as he leans against the counter and signals the bartender that he wants another drink.

God.

"I'm not really the type to dance," Dazai replies.

Chuuya's chest rumbles with laughter. "That's the worst excuse I've ever heard." Dazai's head tilts. "Come on, it's not hard. You just move your body to the music! That's literally it."

"Says *the dancer*."

"*Ex*-dancer."

"A bird doesn't stop being a bird just because it doesn't fly anymore."

Chuuya wants to reply that his analogy is even lamer than his excuse, but a few rowdy people next to him push him forward and right into Dazai's chest, cutting off his words. A hand on his back steadies him. It's such a simple gesture, but it's enough. Chuuya feels every little point where their bodies press together sear straight to his core.

Dazai's so *grounding*. So *calm*. When the world gets overwhelming, he's there with a hand on his back to guide Chuuya through the storm.

With a craving that makes his head spin, Chuuya realizes he wants that. *Him*. In whatever way there is. He just wants it.

"Come," Chuuya says, trying not to slur as he offers Dazai his hand. "It'll be fun."

And after a moment of breath, Dazai does.

It's pure chaos weaving their way through the bodies, but all Chuuya can feel is the firm grip of Dazai's hand around his as he tries to get back to the group. Dazai's hand is a bit bigger, fingers longer. And it fits perfectly.

Finding their people isn't easy, but Chuuya forced himself to remember the spot when he left earlier. As fun as it could be to find entertainment on his own, he doesn't want a repetition of last time. No cab rides at 5 in the morning. He has a plan, and it involves waking up in his own bed.

Higuchi and Yosano are off somewhere, but the others are there where Chuuya last left them. Too drunk, and too caught up in the moment to even notice that Dazai's with them now.

Chuuya lets go of Dazai's hand to turn around, offering him a playful smirk as he moves with the crowd.

The one thing he realized tonight was that Yosano did have good intentions when she made them match. There were quite a few people wanting to take him home tonight, one girl even scribbling her number on his thigh, even more people wanting to dance with him. And Chuuya did.

He and everyone else would be lying if the dance floor of a club like this wasn't a front to grind against complete strangers and have harmless fun. But matching with someone, *matching with Dazai*, gives the people around them a signal. They're *a pair*.

And right now, Chuuya doesn't want a pair of stranger's hands on him. He doesn't want them on Dazai either.

Unfortunately, not everyone seems to get the message.

Chuuya jerks when he feels a body basically wrap around him like a slimy snake, the touch too forced, too clunky. The way Chuuya tenses up should be indication enough to back off a little, but apparently, the stranger takes that as a signal to grind their hips forward as their hand moves down the length of his chest. He almost gags when he feels a puff of wet breath against his neck. Freeing himself isn't hard per se, just a little dehumanizing, so Chuuya's all the happier when Dazai's there in an instant, brushing the guy aside. It's not so much a rescue as a takeover.

A back presses against him again, but this time it's Dazai.

And it's good. It's *perfect*. His hands mold to Chuuya's waist. His hips mold to Chuuya's back. His touch molds to that hollow place inside Chuuya that craves this like it's something tangible, like his lungs will stop working without it.

With every roll of hips, the grip on Chuuya's hips gets tighter, but that only seems to stoke the fire inside Chuuya, a loose breath escaping him. He cranes his neck a little, maybe in an invitation or to see if Dazai will.

Whatever the motivation behind it, it evaporates in a cloud of mist when he feels Dazai's mouth ghost across his skin — never touching, just teasing. A phantom promise of what could be.

Chuuya's spine arches as if struck by lighting.

It's unfair how little it takes Dazai to undo him, s*o unfair,* but Chuuya's never been one to go down without a fight.

The song speeds up, his hands reach back to ground himself on Dazai's hips as his ass pushes back, controlling the friction and angle with cruel precision. Dazai might be an excellent liar with a mind that's dangerous in its attention for details but he's just a man. A man with a body like everyone else and natural reactions like everyone else. Reactions that Chuuya can feel, right there behind him, pressed against the curve of his ass.

Dazai's erection feels hard. Big. So big, it kills Chuuya a little that they're in public right now. (*Not just a little.)*

Dazai lets his hand travel down until it reaches the end of his costume and pinches the material, letting it slap against Chuuya's bare skin. "Do you even realize," he murmurs into the shell of his ear, "how much trouble you are?"

"If I'm trouble," Chuuya breathes, "then you're downright criminal."

Dazai uses his costume again to spin him around, leaning down to him until he's just shy of the finish line. "We're going home." And just like that, he draws away.

The words snap Chuuya out of the drunken moment, making him blink.

"Wha...?"

Dazai doesn't offer any explanations, simply taking Chuuya's hand and leading him through the crowd. It's not that late, and they don't say goodbye to any of his friends. If it weren't for Dazai's unsettling silence, Chuuya would be *excited.* As it is, he only feels weird and robbed of more shameless, public grinding.

The fresh air outside of the club not only sobers him up but makes that silence feel even louder so that when they climb into Dazai's car — not the limousine, Chuuya can't hold it in any longer.

"Can you please just talk to me?" he snaps, staring at Dazai. "Because if it was too much or if you don't want me, then it's fine, whatever. I just can't stand the fucking silent treatment."

It's Dazai's turn to look surprised. "You'd seriously think that?"

"I don't know! You tell me!"

Dazai says his name, and when Chuuya keeps glaring at space next to

his eyes, but not into them, Dazai grips his chin and makes him look at him. "If I could, I would have fucked you right then and there."

Oh.

"Why didn't you?" His voice is breathy. "You know, there are storage rooms for that. I bet the lounge even has fancy ones."

Dazai's eyes narrow a little, and then his hand pulls back. "You know, you're really different than I thought you'd be."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I thought you always pulled back because you were afraid, inexperienced perhaps, but I think I made some grave miscalculations."

Chuuya's brow quirks, and he huffs out a laugh despite himself. "Are you calling me *a slut*?"

Dazai's look is answer enough.

Wow.

The worst thing about this is that Chuuya doesn't mind. No, part of him actually *likes* it.

"What do you think happened with Tachihara when I went home with him?" Chuuya can't resist asking in a taunting voice. "You think we played Mario Kart all night?"

Dazai's smile isn't very nice. "I thought you wanted to piss me off and did whatever it took to make that happen."

"Oh my god," Chuuya says, shaking his head. "Look who's the one projecting now. I'm not scared of sleeping with you, Dazai. It's the part that comes after."

"You can't do casual sex?"

"Of course, I can, but you're my freaking host-brother."

Dazai clearly doesn't see any problem in that. "So?"

"What if your family finds out?"

"They won't."

"But what if they will? There's always a chance of stupid shit happening. What then?"

"We deal with that when it comes to it," Dazai murmurs, voice heavy like syrup. "Right now, I think you're just looking for excuses."

He's not. Really. It is a valid concern. Especially considering Dazai's already strained relationship with his family. His father.

"I hate you," Chuuya whispers but ends up sounding breathless. "I hate you so much I want to put your face through the window."

Dazai's fingers cup his jaw. "Tell that to someone you didn't rut against like an animal in heat just half an hour ago."

Chuuya can't believe he's about to kiss this asshole.

But the moment is perfect.

Dazai's close. So close, Chuuya can smell the whiskey he drank tonight and the cigarette he smoked — *without him*, a stupid part of him thinks. So close he can see the birthmark underneath his lower lashline. So close, he realizes just how dark his brown eyes are and how easy it would be to lose himself in them if he stares a little too long.

All Dazai has to do is press forward. Close the fucking distance.

Then Dazai does, and Chuuya can feel his pulse in his ears, shivering when lips brush against him, so maddeningly slow and light, and Chuuya downright gasps when the bastard pulls away.

Again.

"Look at that," Dazai says. "We're home."

To Dazai's credit, the car does, in fact, stop, but Chuuya's fists remain closed as he squeezes his eyes shut in a pathetic attempt to keep his wits. What the fuck does a guy have to do to get a simple kiss here?

A kiss.

Just a fucking *kiss*.

That's all he needs.

Chuuya only unfolds himself from his position and climbs out of the

car because being home must mean that Dazai's stupid teasing will end. If not, Chuuya will put on a show himself and make Dazai watch, not touch, to show him what this feels like. Awful. It feels *awful.*

When Dazai opens the door of the house, it's eerily silent. A glance at the clock reveals that it's a little past three in the morning — or night, depending on how you look at it. They kick off their shoes in silence, and then there's really not much to do except... walk.

Chuuya looks over his shoulder, making sure that Dazai's actually following him. That this isn't a misunderstanding. Dazai's there, though. Silent but radiating smugness. By god, that little trip to his room has never felt as agonizingly slow and as short as this one. Every step fills the air with more tension, so by the time, Chuuya hears the soft sound of his door falling shut behind them, he's ready to burst into flames.

He glances at Dazai, who is leaning against his door. He swallows.

"Do you want to hear a truth?" Dazai asks.

That stupid game again? Now?

"Fine," Chuuya says and fights off a frustrated sigh, "humor me."

"Truth. Seeing you in that —" Dazai's head shakes a little. "— costume and not doing anything about it has been the hardest thing I've ever had to. I want to rip it off you, but I'm also considering leaving it on, just to see what it looks like while I push you into the mattress."

Now that... that is a truth Chuuya can do something with.

"Why not both?" he asks and crosses the distance only to be met in the middle with a bruising first kiss.

It's a little overwhelming to go from *nothing* to *this* — Dazai's hands on his face, his lips sliding against him with burning urgency, and their hips rocking together, creating friction that demands more and more and more. Chuuya loops his arms around his neck, and the hands in his face slide down his entire body until they meet bare flesh, caressing the back of his thighs, then slipping under the costume and squeezing his ass. It makes Chuuya gasp softly, grinding against the thigh pressed against his body.

His heart hammers when Dazai picks him up and his legs part around his waist. It's not the first time Chuuya is being carried like this, but

it's the first time this high up in the air, the first time kissing this man, and the first time getting dumped on the bed like a sack of rice, eliciting a quiet "*oof*" — one that clears enough of the haze in his mind to get a spark of common sense through.

"We have to be really quiet," Chuuya whispers as Dazai kneels on the edge of the bed, pausing. "Like, *not a sound.* Your parents can't think that I'm fucking someone in here."

After a moment of consideration, Dazai says, "We'll go to my room."

"Ha?"

"They can't do anything if it's me fucking someone in my room," Dazai says with a smirk and then makes a face. "And your bed makes a lot of noise. I should know."

The hand tugging his wrist doesn't give him enough time to overthink the fact that all this time, Chuuya has been sleeping in a bed that Dazai has screwed in before. Chuuya stumbles to his feet, then halts again at the door. "Wait. Do you have condoms?"

"Who do you take me for?"

"Lube?"

"*Yes,* Chuuya."

Chuuya nods, and they leave out of the door, silently tip-toeing up the stairs and to a room on the right that he hasn't entered a single time before. *Dazai's.* He only sees that it's quite dark and big before being shoved against the door. Not that he minds. There will be time for a room tour later, or tomorrow, or literally any other time. Just not now.

Chuuya lets Dazai tilts his head up for him, making the kiss deep and filthy. He usually doesn't give himself time for a lot of kissing because he doesn't get mind-rattling orgasms from it, but... *when the person is good at it,* he thinks hazily, chasing Dazai's lips like a dying breath, *it can be even better than a sloppy handjob.*

And Dazai *is* good.

He's slow and thorough, and every time Chuuya demands more, he denies him, which, as crazy as it sounds, makes the whole thing feel a thousand times hotter. He's gasping with trembling hunger by the time

Dazai's tongue slips into his mouth. Then he falls apart on it.

Somehow, Chuuya's not sure how, they make it to Dazai's bed — huge with black sheets — and he ends on his lap, grinding his hips down over and over again in time with the slide of their lips, Dazai's hands massaging the flesh of his ass.

The fucking costume, though —

Chuuya turns his face an inch, releasing harsh breaths into Dazai's cheek. "I know—I said we can keep it on, but for the love god, please take it off *right now*."

"Heh, uncomfortable?"

"It's hurting my ass, and not in a good way."

He feels Dazai's chuckle reverberate in his chest. "Let's get this off then." Dazai blindly finds the zipper on his back and uses it.

As the pressure around Chuuya's body eases, he realizes that he's really doing this. Sleeping with Dazai. The person he will have to see for the next 11 months because he lives with him. It could ruin his au pair year. It could destroy Dazai's relationship with his family. It's the most stupid thing he'll probably ever do, and there's not a single cell in his body that wants to stop.

Dazai helps him with the upper body part of the angel costume. It just gets tricky once they reach his hips because taking it off would require moving, and Chuuya feels quite at home in this position. Dazai's solution is to kiss him. Pull him down until he's on his fours. Then drag off that fucking costume.

It, more or less, works.

The room wasn't cold before, but now with everything off except the latex underwear that made sure nothing would fall out, Chuuya feels a shiver run down his spine.

"Are you planning to fuck me with your clothes on?" he murmurs, tugging impatiently at Dazai's shirt.

"Would it bother you?"

He supposes there is something hot about it; the utter contrast of them together, but... "Leave your weird bandages on for all I care," he

mutters, "but the shirt gets off. The pants can stay."

"Chuuya's greedy."

"Says you."

Dazai still obliges him, letting Chuuya take off his shirt with top-speed just so he can finally map out Dazai's torso with his own hands. *Greedy*, indeed. He felt him against his back while they were dancing. He saw him hundreds of times around the house. But this is different.

So much better.

Chuuya lets his hand travel lower than his tummy, down his happy trail, only to stop when Dazai's breath hitches ever so slightly. "Sucks to be on the receiving end, huh?"

Bracing himself on his elbows, Dazai returns his stare with amusement.

"I think I can survive a little petting."

Smiling, Chuuya leans down and captures his lips, loving how they feel against him. "I want to ride you," he whispers after a moment or two. "Can I ride you?" He even beats his lashes; craves to wash that smirk off Dazai's face.

The pitch in Dazai's voice is subtle, but it's there. "You want that?"

Chuuya nods eagerly as he works to suck a kiss into the skin on Dazai's neck. He does. He wants it a lot.

"Go on then," Dazai tells him. "I'm not going to stop you."

The words make his blood *burn.* Chuuya untangles from his neck long enough to take a look around. "Where's the lube?"

"Nightstand. First drawer."

Chuuya crosses that distance by crawling, swaying his ass back and forth while he's at it, before retrieving the lube. When he turns back, Dazai's already waiting for him, reaching out with a hand to tug him closer —then he abruptly stops though, his touch becoming so featherlight, it makes Chuuya feel dizzy. "Your injury —"

"It doesn't matter," he mutters.

Dazai's look is full of doubts and very annoying. "If there's something that would hurt you, then I'd like to know."

"Just don't... don't stretch it too long." Chuuya jerks his right leg. "Now shut up."

Talking about leg injuries isn't very sexy as far as he's aware.

Dazai uses Chuuya's hips this time to move him forward. Once he's within close distance, his mouth leaves a series of kisses on his stomach, his hand slides beneath the waistband of Chuuya's underwear, wraps around his cock, and the slight frown between Chuuya's brows melts into a sigh.

Dazai's fist feels feverishly hot around him. Tight and warm and —

"Take these off," Dazai tells him before grabbing the lube.

Chuuya doesn't mind the switch in dynamics. It's a bit new to him, but with Dazai, not very surprising, so he silently gets rid of the underwear and straddles his hips, suppressing a groan at the way the rough fabric of Dazai's pants feel against his bare skin. He's curious to see where Dazai might take this, but he's also very strung out and in need of — of something — anything, so —

"Come on, Dazai," he half-snaps. "Your family members are early birds."

"You have no ounce of patience, do you?"

"*Dazai* —"

"Shh," it's not his lips against his neck that shut him up, but the single finger that traces the flesh around his rim, massaging the skin more than anything, really, but it's something. "You really are anything *but* inexperienced, are you?"

Dazai doesn't seem to push in that fucking finger any time soon, so Chuuya does the job himself. It's not easy from this angle, and it's not like this is a cock — hard to miss — but he makes due anyway, rocking down on it with a hiss directed at Dazai. "W-what do you want to hear, asshole?"

"Did you imagine yourself riding me while you were in your bed at night? Dream about rocking down on me just like that?"

Fuck.

"Yeah," he breathes out because he has. "More, Dazai."

At least, Dazai grants him that, slipping in a second finger before pulling him close with a firm hold on his chin. Dazai sucks a kiss into his lips and says, "C'mon, let me see you ride my fingers."

Chuuya's brain goes a little haywire after that.

Shifting, he braces his hands on Dazai's legs and starts a fast, shallow rhythm, not nearly precise enough to reach his prostate, but enough to open him up for the main dish. And from what Chuuya has felt earlier, Dazai's not exactly small. His cock twitches at the thought alone. The heat in his stomach demands something deeper, something that will grind straight into his prostate and send him over the edge, but Chuuya can't stop now, not when Dazai's here looking at him like that.

"More," he hisses, a drop of sweat rolling down his chest. "I need —"

Dazai adds a third finger, but this time when Chuuya rolls his hips down, Dazai thrusts upward, meeting him in the middle. It's a clumsy rhythm at first, yeah, but it reaches deeper. It makes his legs shake with the effort and the desire coiling in his guts, but it feels *so good.*

The moment he feels Dazai brush that one spot, Chuuya lets his movements falter, taking one moment to breathe, then to move forward and tangle his fingers in his hair. "Okay, okay, okay," he breathes, "I'm ready — I am —"

The bastard dares to smile. "Are you now?"

Dazai's hair is soft, almost silky, but that doesn't stop Chuuya from tugging at it until his grip borders on painful. "Yes," he hisses, returning the question in his eyes with fierce determination, "I am."

"Since you're asking so nicely..." Dazai nods down at himself. "My wallet's in my pocket. Condoms are there."

Chuuya fingers shake a little as he fumbles around in Dazai's pants until he finally feels the rough outline of his wallet and pulls it out, hurrying to open it until he spots condoms. His movements stutter when Dazai's fingers deliver three dead-on thrusts into his prostate before slipping out. After shooting the bastard a glare, Chuuya shifts on his lap until he can get his hands on his belt, taking care of it with quick and efficient skill before doing the same with his black slacks.

Getting off the briefs, Chuuya feels like it's Christmas morning, and he's unpacking his present. And here it is, his gift wrapped inexpensive material and clearly just as happy to see him. As impatient as he might be, Chuuya still has enough strength to savor this moment. He palms his trapped erection softly, getting a feel for him, and then glances at Dazai, throat going dry at the hungry gleam he finds in his wide, black eyes.

"Enjoying yourself?"

"Very," Chuuya murmurs, finally allowing himself to dip his finger below the waistband and drag them down. The sight makes him swallow.

Yes.

Oh yes, he's enjoying himself a lot.

For a moment, he feels torn between leaning down and getting a taste because not doing so would be *criminal*, but Chuuya's twitching with the urge to get fucked, needing it inside him and not anywhere else. Everything else can wait for later, or tomorrow, or any other day — he chooses to ignore that he seems to have already made up his made about this not being a one-time thing. But really, how could he not repeat this?

In the end, Chuuya settles on wrapping his fingers around his length and stroke, slowly, before using his thumb to swipe the precome that wells there, lifting it to his mouth and letting his tongue lick it away.

The hand that's settled on Chuuya's hip clenches ever so slightly.

Chuuya doesn't go slowly with everything else; he couldn't even if he wanted to.

After getting lube, he gives Dazai another few strokes from top to bottom, just to feel his cock twitch in the cage of his fingers before grabbing the condom. Dazai's mostly silent, watching, only murmuring a few unintelligible praises when Chuuya lifts his hips and positions himself until he can feel the tip slide between his cheeks, that little pre-taste alone driving him crazy. He gives himself enough time to sink down and feel every single inch of Dazai slide inside him. Then his patience just about snaps.

They both swear a little when Dazai's pelvis meets his ass, and Chuuya leans forward, swallowing that breathless curse with a breathless kiss

before pushing him down with a hand on his bandaged chest. It makes Dazai breathe even harder.

Chuuya shifts again, back arching and hands bracing on Dazai's thighs before he starts moving a little, creating an angle that makes him see sparks every time he rocks down.

Jesus.

Maybe he should have let Dazai add another finger, but even with that slight of burn of *too much*, Chuuya doesn't find it in him to care. It feels too good. He feels too full to regret it. Dazai's hands are like steel on his waist. The thought of bruises forming there makes him hiss and toss his head back as he fucks himself down on Dazai's cock. Bruises mean that he's *alive*. Bruises mean that Chuuya's body *worked* and *felt something.*

A moan slips out of him, and Chuuya instantly feels a hand cover his mouth.

"Quietly," Dazai tells him softly, sitting up, "remember?"

Chuuya's answer is a pitiful hiss. Somewhere in the back of his head, yeah, he remembers, but right now, it's lost between the feeling of being stretched out on Dazai's cock, hurtling towards an abyss that seems so close and yet so far.

Dazai's fingers part, his thumb stroking Chuuya's lips. It's a silent question, and Chuuya doesn't hesitate to answer with a yes, opening up for him and letting his thumb press down on his tongue. Chuuya sucks. He sucks and groans quietly, exactly how he would around Dazai's cock.

With a renewed fervor in his blood, Chuuya picks up the pace and bounces on Dazai's cock, fast and deep and absolutely maddening in the way it abuses his prostate.

He's close. He knows he is. Quiet, little whimpering sounds escape his throat every time he sinks down again. And it's when Dazai grips his hips again and holds him still, changing the rhythm, so it's him fucking up into Chuuya and all but grinding into his prostate, milking him dry, that every muscle in his body locks and a few long, blissful moments, Chuuya comes.

It's so intense he has to clamp a hand over his mouth in order not to wake up the entire goddamn house — even more so when Dazai

pushes him down this time. As Chuuya clenches around him, still coming down from a shattering orgasm, Dazai fucks into him, his thrusts brutal and savage as he chases his own orgasm, the bed under them making awful noises that both of them ignore, too far gone to care about anything but *this* right now. Chuuya's legs wrap around Dazai's torso, back arching off the bed because of the overstimulation. The pleasure inside him is confusing, so mindlessly good but too much and then —

Dazai's rhythm shatters, and three deep thrusts later, he tenses, his hips twitching a little as he comes. Chuuya's head falls back against the mattress and for a few seconds, he thinks he'll either pass out or fall asleep. It's all a bit disorienting. Chuuya still breathless and gasping. Dazai above him, leaning his face against the muscles on his chest. Several long, blissful minutes pass before the afterglow starts bleeding into the sweaty, gross reality.

"Jesus," Chuuya murmurs. "I need water."

Dazai's quiet as he slips out of him and discards the used condom in the trash as Chuuya finds a bottle of water on the nightstand and downs half of it in mere seconds. Next, he needs a shower. He can't even bring himself to care that it might be loud and wake up the family.

"*Chuuya*," he hears Dazai say then.

"What?"

"You should have gone as a cowboy."

Chuuya turns to blink at him.

"Get it? Because you like to—"

"Yeah, I fucking get it," he mutters and delivers a light slap to Dazai's thighs. "Ha, ha. Very funny. Now, do you have a shirt?"

Dazai makes a show of looking around his room. "I don't know. Do I? In a room with all my clothes inside?"

"God, just give me one!"

"As a little souvenir?" the idiot asks, but thankfully he does move to grab a shirt from the pile of ironed clothing on his chair.

"No." Chuuya catches what's tossed to him, pulling it over his head. "I just don't want to walk to my room butt-naked. And I'm not going squeezing myself into that fucking costume again."

"Whatever you say, chibi ~"

It's a big shirt — at least, for him — and covers him up to his thighs.

After he grabs his things, Chuuya glances at Dazai, who's fumbling around in his closet for something, still naked save for the bandages. Chuuya feels himself hesitating when his fingers wrap around the door handle. *Is he supposed to say something? Should they even talk about it?*

"You know where the way out is," Dazai provides casually, sparing them any awkwardness.

Well, so much for *that,* although Chuuya's certainly not complaining. He wanted something easy, something that isn't complicated, and that's what he's getting. It's *perfect.*

"Night, shithead."

And thank you for the orgasm.

"Good night, Chuuya."

Chapter 7: Chuuya Was A Cowboy

Chapter Notes

This one's a little short but I hope you'll enjoy it anyway!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Chuuya wakes up the following day, it takes him a few moments of digging through his memories to figure out whether last night actually happened, or whether it was just a painfully vivid dream — it wouldn't be the first one to involve Dazai.

As it is, it wasn't a dream.

Last night happened.

Lying in bed, he stares at his ceiling for several minutes, mourning the loss of the peaceful au pair year he could have had if he had used his goddamn brain for once. Then he crawls out and gets ready to face the music.

After slipping into a pair of sweatpants and a shirt and brushing his teeth, he rounds the corner to the kitchen and is a little relieved to see only Hayashi at the table, sipping at a cup of coffee. That is until something in the corner of his vision moves, and Chuuya's little sigh gets stuck in his throat as Dazai comes out of the pantry, carrying a bottle of orange juice.

Of course.

Hayashi offers him a bright smile when she spots him standing there. "Good morning, Chuuya-kun."

"Morning," he says and deliberately steps out of Dazai's way, except he must have thought the same thing, moving in the same direction which makes them perform an awkward little dance until with an aggravating smirk, Dazai touches his shoulder and guides him away from him. "Here." It sends a series of unwanted and breakfast-inappropriate images through Chuuya's mind, and he has to shake his head to snap out of it although he still can't help but let his fingers ghost over his hipbone, wondering if he'll find the shadow of a bruise blossoming there.

"I heard you had fun yesterday," Hayashi's voice cuts through his

thoughts. "Dazai told me *all about it*."

It sounds so dirty considering last night's events that Chuuya nearly lets his plate drop. *She's just talking about the party*, he tells himself as he fills it with fried eggs. *Just the party, not the dirty, shameless sex you had with her son a few walls away from her room afterwards.* "Yeah. It was fun."

"What did you go as again?"

"Chuuya was a cowboy," Dazai replies in his place and pretends to throw an invisible lasso. "Yeehaw."

Chuuya forces air back out of his lungs in a pitiful attempt at staying calm.

Hayashi covers her surprise with a nod. "Oh? Do you have pictures? I bet your fathers would love to see what you're up to here these days."

"Uh," he sits down at the table, scratching the back of his neck, "my battery died the moment we left the house."

"Oh, dear." Hayashi turns to Dazai then. "Did you take any pictures?"

Dazai actually gets out his phone. "Let me see." Chuuya all but stabs his food with the fork. "Mm, I fear not. It was so terribly dark in there; the pictures would have turned out bad anyway."

"One would think that with all the technology you kids have, you'd use it as much as possible," Hayashi grumbles.

"Sorry," Chuuya feels the need to say.

She waves him off with a sigh and gets to her feet. "Don't worry. I'm only thinking of your dads. Anyways, will you take Diabolo for a longer walk today? I'm pretty sure I heard him ravaging the house last night. He's probably bored."

A piece of egg gets stuck in Chuuya's throat, and he starts coughing, face flushing an angry red, eyes tearing up. It takes him way too long to recover so that Dazai has to start slapping his back to help him breathe normally again.

"Are you all right?" he hears Hayashi ask, clearly concerned.

"I'm — I'm fine." Chuuya's glad she's behind him and unable to see his treacherous face that would probably betray all kinds of information

that she doesn't need to know. "And, yeah, of course. I'll power him out."

"Thank you! Make sure not to die in the meantime, though."

Chuuya fakes a laugh — one that drops the moment she leaves the kitchen and bleeds into a glare directed at Dazai instead. "You *asshole*."

"Hey, that last one wasn't even my fault."

"I meant the *cowboy* thing, bastard. Repeating jokes doesn't make them any funnier, just so you know."

Dazai smirks over the rim of his glass. "I still laughed."

"You might think it's funny, but there are actual things at stake," Chuuya mutters. And not just for him.

"So you regret it. Is that what you're saying?"

The reply shoots out of Chuuya before he can even think about it. "No." He draws back, rolling his eyes. "*I mean* — not really. I had fun. I just think you should be more careful with what you say around your family."

"I had fun too."

"Duh."

Dazai's amused expression becomes even more amused as he leans forward, tracing patterns into the table with his index finger. "So if I am more careful, then technically, there is nothing speaking against more fun. Correct?"

Chuuya's eyes narrow. "You want to make this a thing?" he asks to make sure he's not misinterpreting his words.

Dazai shrugs. "Not making it a thing would be a wasted opportunity. We've got chemistry. We're compatible in bed. It was a good fuck. So why reduce it to one night only?"

There are many reasons *why*.

It dramatically increases the chance of his family finding out.

It can get complicated and messy, especially when you live together.

Dazai might not even know what he's in for.

And yet.

Chuuya can't deny the hot flare in his stomach at the suggestion.

There are already a thousand images running through his mind of everything he could do to Dazai — who is he kidding: what he *will* do.

"I guess," Chuuya slowly says and plays with the fork between his lips, letting his tongue drag over the silverware, "I can see where you're coming from."

"I knew that pretty head of yours is smart, too."

"I can still change my mind, bastard."

"Mm," Dazai hums and gets up to clear away his dishes, throwing a glance at the watch around his wrist. "I still have one hour before my lecture. You want to have sex?"

Chuuya's breakfast gets abandoned on the table.

It's been five days.

Five days of *having a thing* with Dazai Osamu, which is basically just a euphemism for fucking whenever the situation allows it. To be quite, honest Chuuya has no idea what he's doing, but then again, he's not really thinking about it either. Although Dazai might be a complicated person, the sex with him is surprisingly easy — and good, on top of that.

That's as far as Chuuya is willing to let his thoughts wander on that subject, especially when he's pretty busy right now. Dazai was barely home the last few days, spending it at the library or at Yosano's place to study, which is why Chuuya is currently being pressed into the mattress of his bed.

Two days is a very long time.

"Stop teasing me," he hisses, tossing his head back as he arches into the hips pinning him in place.

Dazai's breath against his neck is warm and soft. "I'm not *teasing* you. I'm *kissing* you," he points out as if that actually matters.

"Dazai." Tangling his fingers in his hair, Chuuya all but forces the idiot to look at him. "I don't want kisses. I want you to *fuck* me."

Chuuya's momentary hope that the idiot is leaning away to get out of his fucking pants and hopefully get it on already crumbles to dust when Dazai leans in to kiss him on the lips, though Chuuya can't help but kiss him back immediately either. He's good at that too.

Dazai clearly wants to make a point.

His hand comes up to Chuuya's jaw and cups it, controlling every slide of lips and tongue, because even though Chuuya would never admit it, the way his hips twitch every time is more than enough to betray him. Dazai's leg slides between his thighs, giving him something to grind against. And his tongue is too good, too hot not to fall apart on it. When he pulls back, Chuuya can't help but chase him; it makes that bastard stop him with a thumb on his lips. "Now, what was that about not wanting to be kissed?"

"Okay, *fine,*" Chuuya mutters. "I take it back."

"Say it."

"Don't overdo it, asshole."

"Say it, or you won't get this," Dazai says, motioning at his mouth, "nor this," he says and waves down their bodies.

Chuuya would call bullshit, except that in this thing they have, he's the one who needs way more sex — or, at least, who can't stand all the teasing. It's not like Dazai isn't into it — because he definitely is. It's just that Chuuya needs more. Way more. So he wouldn't put it past Dazai to actually get and leave him here. And he can't have that.

Chuuya squeezes his eyes shut and lets out a loud, vexed breath. "Kiss me."

"Now make it believable," he hears Dazai reply. "Like you're not currently talking to a wet frog."

Opening his eyes again, he cups the back of Dazai's head, biting his own lip as he does so and batting his lashes for the extra effect. "Can I get a kiss?" he asks. "Please...?"

He feels Dazai's smirk slide against his lips, and even though it's annoying as hell, it's also infectious and —

There's a loud knock on the door.

"Chuuya?" Hayashi's voice comes from the other side. "Can I come in?"

Chuuya rips away from Dazai at the speed of sunlight, pushing him down the bed and fussing with his hair and sweats at the same time. "Uh, yeah, just — one sec!"

He spins to Dazai, shooing him away. "Go!"

"Where?" Dazai hisses. "I can't exactly jump out of the window!"

"Under the bed!"

"She'll see me! That only works in movies!"

Chuuya frantically looks around before nodding towards the bathroom. At least, Dazai doesn't argue. It will only work if Hayashi doesn't look in there, but right now, it's better than nothing. After Chuuya quietly shuts the bathroom door and straightens out his clothes for the tenth time, he opens the main door. "Hi," he says and leans against his doorframe. "What's up?"

"Are you busy?" Hayashi asks with a polite smile. "It sounded like you were talking to someone."

"Oh — oh, yeah. I just got off facetime with my fathers."

"I hope didn't interrupt."

"Not at all," Chuuya says with a wave of his hand. "Don't worry."

"So," Hayashi says, and to his utter distress, actually steps inside his room, "I actually wanted to check in on you. See how you're doing." Her genuine smile manages to soften some of the loud thunder in his chest. "It's probably not easy to be so far from home, right? I remember my first vacation without my parents and I got homesick not even three days later. Then again you kids these days are tougher."

Although Chuuya appreciates her concern, it simply could not have come at a worse time than this.

"I'm great. I like it here. I think your family is fabulous, so there's nothing to worry about it!"

"I'm glad to hear it," Hayashi says with a nod. "I was a little nervous at first about Dazai. You see, he can be very... special in the way he acts

and talks to people, but it seems like you two get along just fine now. The first few weeks had me losing sleep, to be honest, but that party must have given you some bonding experience, right? I always did like Halloween. So fun."

Chuuya almost breaks character right then and there. "Yeah, we're, uh... good."

"Deep down, Dazai's a good kid. He just sometimes has trouble showing it. I'm glad he gave you that opportunity, though." Hayashi moves back to the door, and Chuuya's about ready to collapse from relief when she grabs the knob of the bathroom door. "I'm doing laundry. Do you have any? Some towe—"

"No!" Chuuya replies way too fast and lets out a nervous, high-pitched laugh before clearing his throat. "I mean, I did laundry yesterday. I have none. I'm all good. Perfect."

"Okay..." Hayashi says with a little frown before finally stepping out into the hallway and out of his goddamn room. "Then I'll see you at dinner."

"Yup. Can't wait!"

He waits an entire minute before he opens the door of the bathroom, feeling like a herd of elephants trampled all over his chest. Lying is *exhausting*. How do people do it all the time? Dazai, the little shit, is lying in the empty bathtub and playing games on his phone.

"You could have at least tried to hide," Chuuya snaps.

"Chuuya," Dazai says and makes a point of glancing around, "do I look like I fit into any of these tiny things?"

No. He does not.

With a sigh, Chuuya walks back to his bed and collapses face-first on it. A few moments later, the mattress dips under more weight.

"This was close," Chuuya mutters, voice muffled. "*Too close*." As good as the sex is, it's also incredibly hard to be quiet all the time. They're rarely actually alone. Someone's always in the house. They're playing a really dangerous game here.

Dazai's silent for so long that when he speaks, Chuuya startles a little. "I could move out."

Chuuya slowly lifts his head to stare at him. "*What?*"

"I could move out," Dazai repeats with a shrug like he's talking about doing the groceries. "Then we wouldn't have to sneak around anymore."

Move out just so they can fuck without any interruptions?

"Dazai," Chuuya feels the need to say, "you do know that this is... just sex, right?"

Thankfully, the look Dazai shoots him is mockingly enough to be positive that they're on the same page here. "I'm not proposing to you, silly. I've been meaning to move out for a long time, actually. I might as well do it now."

Chuuya braces his cheek against his hand, frowning. "I guess..."

Dazai lies down right across from him, so there are only a few inches left separating them. "And then," he murmurs, using his sex voice, "I could fuck you anywhere I want to, and you could be as loud as possible." His index finger traces the length of his neck. "I could fuck you on the floor. On my bed. In the bathroom. On my desk in the office—"

"You'd have an office?"

"Of course, I'd have an office," Dazai tells him with his lips against Chuuya's jaw now. "I'm the heir of a hotel chain — off an entire business empire."

Chuuya manages to blink through the haze in his mind. "I thought you weren't interested in all that?"

"Well," Dazai whispers. "I seem to have found some motivation."

Chapter End Notes

> On twitter, this was the end of part 1 of the story... here, I'm not sooo sure. I might add an extra chapter before part 2 because there will be a little time skip! We'll see what feels right though lol

Chapter 8: Holiday Season

Chapter Notes

Content Warnings:
- mention of (past) suicide
- explicit sexual content

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's Christmas.

It's a holiday more annoying than anything, what with the strained dinner conversations and the house full of distant relatives acting civil for one night, but with Chuuya at the table this year, it might get... interesting.

Something else that's worth getting out of bed today is that it's going to be the last Christmas living here. The penthouse Dazai's going to move into in less than a week is still a work in progress, but once all the walls are painted and the new furniture delivered, there'll be nothing stopping him anymore from zipping up his suitcases and walking out of the door.

Not that it will make much of a difference — Dazai has made it a habit to only stay in this house when it's absolutely necessary a long time ago... but it's symbolic. Dazai slides out of bed, ignoring the insistent buzzing of his phone as he goes to take a cold shower. Last night ended only a few hours ago. Chuuya was still awake when he came home from Yosano's place, and so they made use of that short span of interrupted time. Repeatedly. Dazai's insomnia stripped him of the luxury of ever feeling well-rested. So he's used to it. Chuuya, on the other hand... he will probably need a few hours and three cups of coffee before losing his Speak-and-I'll-kill-you-glare.

When he comes out of the bathroom, his phone is still buzzing, an incoming call from Akiko, and he picks it up with a sigh. "What?"

"Good morning to you too, sunshine," she says on the other side of the line. "And merry Christmas."

"You already told me that yesterday."

"Well —" There's the sound of a busy street in the background, a car honking. "— now I'm telling you again."

"Where are you?"

"Walking up the stairs to a hospital."

Dazai pauses. "What happened? Do you need me to get you?"

"Oh, relax. My nan missed the last couple of stairs and sprained her ankle. It's nothing serious, but father wants us to stay with her. That's why I'm calling. We can't come tonight."

"Understandable."

Spending Christmas alone in a hospital bed isn't all too festive.

"That won't be a problem, will it?"

Dazai huffs out a breath as he trots down the stairs. "Your grandmother is lying injured in a hospital. My father will understand, Kiko."

"I just don't want you to get more shit from him than you deserve."

"He will get over it."

"Send everyone our regards, will you?"

In the kitchen, Chuuya's so busy glowering at the coffee machine that he doesn't even bother acknowledging Dazai until he pinches his bare arm. He reacts with an offended gasp and a kick to his shin.

"Sure," Dazai eventually replies, "will do. Wish Ueda-san a speedy recovery from me."

"Why can I hear you smiling?" Akiko questions. "It's freaking me out."

"I'm not smiling," Dazai replies and watches Chuuya's brows crease with interest. "I'm hanging up now. Bye."

"Who was that?" Chuuya asks before leaning back against the counter with his cup of coffee.

Dazai's eyes drift over the leftover food on the table. "Akiko."

"Who is Ueda-san?"

"Her grandma."

"What's wrong with her?"

He shoots Chuuya a look. "You're awfully curious."

"I'm the perfect amount of curious," Chuuya immediately retorts and tries to kick him again, missing the mark by a few inches. "Now, what's wrong with Yosano's grandmother?"

"For one, she still believes her granddaughter is straight."

"What? I meant — why did you wish her a speedy recovery?!"

"Ah, she fell down the stairs. Poor thing. And now they can't come to our Christmas dinner. Poor us."

"They were still invited? Even though you and Yosano broke up?"

"Chuuya," Dazai says, tilting his head. "If you haven't noticed by now, my father doesn't exactly agree with that break-up." He shrugs. "It might even be a good thing. Less bothersome relationship politics."

Chuuya takes that in with a thoughtful sip of his coffee, letting Dazai work around him as he goes to grab a mug of his own. That little brat. "Your other family is coming tonight too, right?" Dazai hums. "Are they... nice?"

"They're miserable workaholics who consider the holidays as an opportunity to mend their relationships in their favor."

Meaning, they will act friendly, but that's pretty much about it. "Don't worry, chibi," Dazai drawls, pressing a hand against Chuuya's navy shirt. "Hayashi loves you. They will all follow suit."

He's treading dangerous waters teasing Chuuya in the middle of the kitchen, where everyone could walk in at any given moment — and a simple touch like this is more than enough to make him squirm. But it's too much fun to resist the temptation.

"I don't care about that," Chuuya huffs.

"No? You don't want to make a good impression?"

"No," is the breathy answer, and then when Dazai's hand slides even lower, Chuuya's eyes squeeze shut. "Stop teasing me! I'm supposed to go to the bakery in fifteen minutes!"

Dazai steps back. "I'm not doing anything."

"Uh-uh, except being a ginormous jerk."

"I'll see you at dinner, Chuuya."

Maybe tonight won't be so bad, after all. Dazai has a few ideas swirling around in his head about how to spice the whole thing up.

Even with Santa Claus coming to town, he has quite a few things to do. First, there's been an issue with the shipment of his new bed that he needs to take care of. Second, he still needs to find a desk. Third, go to his barber. And finally, step by his father's office not only to deliver the news but sign papers.

As expected, the man leans back in his seat with a sigh that could only be described as disappointed.

As prepared, Dazai shoves his hands into the pockets of his coat. "It's not like I pushed Ueda-san down the stairs."

"This isn't funny," his father says. "These are delicate relationships we've been tending to for ages, and you're trampling all over them." Dazai says nothing. "But it's not all lost yet. Maybe if Yosano sees that you're finally starting to care about your future, she'll consider giving you another chance."

Highly unlikely, Dazai thinks, given that she's set eyes on Kouyou again. But again, he remains quiet.

"Here," his father slides a paper across his desk, "your signature."

The labor agreement staring back at Dazai is a necessary sacrifice for both the penthouse and the freedom he'll gain soon. A small one, even. He might have never been interested in playing businessman, but that doesn't mean he isn’t exceptionally good at it.

Dazai rolls the pen between his fingers and signs the thing.

When it's done, his father gives him a look. "This is the first smart thing you've done in years."

Is this the part where he tells Dazai he's proud of him?

"Now get out of here. And don't embarrass me in front of the guests tonight."

"I'm not planning to," Dazai replies after getting to his feet. If Chuuya

can be quiet, that is. (Of course, he can.)

The rest of his day pales in comparison, so by the time Dazai opens the door to his house, he's almost excited — at least, as close to excited as he'll ever come to feel. Earlier, he sent Chuuya pictures of several desks that he's still deciding between, but Chuuya replied with question marks and then more or less bullied him about being a lousy texter, so he still needs an answer.

Thankfully, he's right there in the living room, fussing with the pillows on the couch.

"Having fun?" Dazai asks.

"Time of my life," Chuuya mutters, then shoots him a frown. "Why the desks?"

Dazai makes sure there's no one in earshot, then says, "I wanted your input since you will be the one bent over it."

"Oh." Chuuya's furrowed brows melt into a nod. "Then the black one. Definitely the black one."

Smart choice. He looks ravishing in black.

On his way to his bedroom, Dazai neatly avoids Diabolo and Ryunosuke coming back from the backyard, hearing Chuuya do the opposite before he shuts the door.

It doesn't take long for his relatives to arrive, so after Dazai changes into a grey button-up shirt Hayashi gave him for his last birthday, he figures he can at least waste time with Chuuya downstairs — Chuuya, who not only is gorgeous in black but in every other color, too.

This time, it's a lovely shade of ruby, making the ice in his eyes pop.

As the various family members get welcomed with an overbearing hubbub, Chuuya staying back for now, Dazai decides to help him out a little.

"Nakagawa and Atsuko Tsushima," he murmurs next to him. "My uncle and his wife. They own several casinos on the other side of the city."

Chuuya glances at him. "Are they from your father's side?"

"Yes. Everyone that will be here tonight is."

"Why only his?"

"My mother's family hasn't shown face ever since she killed herself," Dazai says. "I guess they can't handle the shame."

Chuuya's lashes flutter before his curious expression shatters. It's not pity, though. Not from what Dazai can tell. "I'm sorry."

Dazai shrugs. "You don't have to be."

"What about Hayashi?"

"Her parents both died a few years ago. No siblings."

"Oh." Chuuya nods at another pair. "Who are they?"

"Tanji and Hagiwara Goro. My father's step sister and her husband..."

Tanji is also his favorite one, simply because she doesn't care enough to drill him with questions. Meanwhile, Atsuko asks him the same question every single year. "Have you put a ring on it yet?" Dazai has to stifle a gleeful laugh when he gets to tell her that he and Akiko broke up. Aside from the unchanging questions directed at him — *how are his grades? What are his plans for the future? Has he seen the Facebook post about someone's daughter's engagement?* — Dazai's mostly let off the hook as his relatives dig into Chuuya instead.

Chuuya holds his ground smoothly; even his sometimes vulgar nature seems to delight the people around him. Given that he was just as drawn to him from the moment they met, Dazai can't really blame them.

It's the deadly combination of his French accent and infectious laugh.

The dinner table splits when a few people go outside to smoke, and Dazai uses the opportunity to get to his feet, placing one gentle touch on Chuuya's shoulder before leaving for the kitchen. Sure enough, he follows, his cheeks flushed, lips shiny from red wine.

"Hi," Chuuya says, almost shyly, as he joins Dazai at the sink. "Your relatives are..."

"Crazy?"

"Loud, talkative, but nice."

"And they seem to like you," Dazai says and dries his hands with a

towel before lightly tossing it at Chuuya. "Told you they would."

Chuuya catches it with a scowl. "Don't *told you* me. It's not cute."

"Oh no, however, shall I survive hearing that?"

"Shut up." And when Dazai moves to step closer, he raises a threatening finger. ""No teasing. There are too many people in this house tonight."

"Stupidly drunk people," Dazai points out with an innocent shrug, "but yes, there are many of them."

"It's risky," Chuuya adds as if trying to convince himself.

"And you like that."

"I do n— okay, well..." Chuuya opens his mouth and closes it again, then crosses his arms. "They'll ask where we are."

"You're putting the kids to bed. And I always leave dinners early."

"...where?"

Dazai can't help but smirk as he nudges his head towards the closest bathroom, in the hallway, not far away from where they're dining.

"You're despicable."

"Hm," Dazai says with a controlled grin and snatches a strawberry off the spongecake leftovers lying around, taking a delicate bite before offering the rest to Chuuya, "that's not the word I would use to describe myself."

Chuuya's glare never pales, even as he opens his mouth.

His boundless refusal to bend, give Dazai an inch, even when one part of him wants to, is intriguing. Dazai has met lots of people who would gladly take a turn in punching him, even more people who would bend over backwards to get more than a smile from him, but Chuuya's an unpredictable combination of both, constantly pushing back, still ending up with Dazai feeding him. In more ways than one.

"I can be nice," he says softly, "right?"

"Only when it benefits you," Chuuya mutters, but his voice isn't in it.

Lifting his hand to Chuuya's mouth, he raises his brow. A silent question. After a nod, Dazai uses his thumb to wipe away a crumb of cream that got stuck on his lip.

Most of his relatives are in the dining room. A few are outside smoking. The kitchen is blissfully empty. He offers Chuuya his thumb, and Chuuya lets his lips fall closed around it, tongue dancing across Dazai's finger as he sucks.

His mouth? *Criminal.*

Dazai cups his jaw, stopping him before this little display can escalate into something that might get them actually caught. As fun as it is walking a fine line, he prefers Chuuya here, safe, and not sent back to France because someone from Dazai's family walked in on them and told his father.

"Bathroom," he says. "Five minutes."

Chuuya nods, and then fussing with the collar of his shirt, walks away.

Dazai's already half-hard when he sits down at the edge of the bathtub. No surprise there. Chuuya might be a greedy, insatiable sex monster, but Dazai's just affected. Whether it's six in the morning as he stumbles down the hallway or at a party, Chuuya's gorgeous. He has a great ass. Toned, lean muscles — probably from ballet. And both his hands and his mouth are criminally skilled. But what kills Dazai the most is how much he enjoys himself, not for show, not even for Dazai, but just because he does, unashamed of his own desires. It's the hottest thing Dazai has ever seen, and mind you, he has been with confident people — he lost his virginity and many other firsts to Akiko.

There's a quiet knock on the door.

He lets Chuuya slip inside. Then, as soon as they hear the click of the lock, Dazai's pushing him against the wall for a fierce kiss while his one hand is already working on his pants. Time is of the essence here, after all. Even when he was to be completely quiet, Chuuya's every bit as demanding and needy, chasing his lips with fervor and shallow, tiny breaths against his mouth. Before the pants come off, Dazai all but pushes him against the sink, grabbing the lube he left in the cabinet earlier, and only then he shoves down Chuuya's pants and briefs, just low enough to have a free room for his hands.

Chuuya's fingers are gripping the marmor of the sink, and his head is

bent low, not looking in the mirror. Dazai plans to change that soon.

Their circumstances and the thunderous beat of his heart in his ears are alluring reasons to hurry up the entire prepping process, but Dazai deliberately slows down when he sinks the first finger into Chuuya. He has been in control of his needs and emotions for a long time now, and he's not going to stop now. Chuuya's entire body tenses, then relaxes, his hips immediately pressing back in what little room Dazai's giving him here. He doesn't tease this time, aiming for Chuuya's prostate and not letting up when he finds it, instead adding a second finger when he's sure that Chuuya's loose enough — something Dazai can basically feel him silently bitching about with the grind of his hips because neither of them speaks. Even fingering him open produces sounds, so talking, especially all the cussing and gasping and threatening Chuuya likes to do, would be treading extremely dangerous waters.

Dazai waits until he's three fingers deep to lean over his back, his mouth an inch shy of Chuuya's ear before he seizes his jaw and, with gentle fingers, forces him to look into the mirror. "Look at you," he whispers, "getting fucked with my entire bloodline in the next room." Chuuya opens his mouth on a silent moan, trembling a little as Dazai grinds his fingers against his prostate.

"And you like it." Chuuya tries to shake his head against Dazai's chest, but it's a pathetic attempt, sweet in its weakness. "Oh, I think I even have reason to believe you're getting more off on this than usual."

A sound comes from the other side of the bathroom door, and Dazai stills a little, making Chuuya trash with frustration.

Footsteps, though after there's shuffling and a heavy thud like boots landing on the floor, they recede.

Chuuya's fingers digging into his arm make him aware that he has been neglecting his task at hand. Dazai apologizes with a kiss to Chuuya's neck that is pulsingly hot, a tear of sweat running down the length of it. Even if his muscles feel wound up and angry, Chuuya lets out a soft sigh at that, relaxing a little.

He's ready, and so is Dazai, who has been for a while now.

But Dazai doesn't plan to finish this little thing against the sink, no. So instead, he slides out his fingers, making Chuuya hiss through his teeth, and then guides them backwards until he can sit down on the edge of the tub.

When Chuuya notices what's happening, he cranes his neck and manages a glare. "Are you really that lazy?" he whisper-snaps.

"Not lazy." Dazai wrenches down his pants and strokes his leaking cock with lube-covered fingers as the other one grips Chuuya's hips, keeping him close. "I just like feeling you squirm."

"I don't sq—" His mouth clamps shut when Dazai pulls him back and, with his hands around his waist, guides him onto his cock. Chuuya's back tenses when the tip catches, feeling like he's holding his breath as he sinks down inch by inch until finally, Dazai bottoms out inside of him, his cock buried in unbelievable heat, and Chuuya's chest falls with a silent tremor running through his body.

"Beautiful," Dazai whispers into his ear, "now fuck yourself. Silently. You love doing that, after all, don't you?"

The broken noise that rips out of Chuuya is the most beautiful sound he's ever heard. Desperate. Angry. Wanting. His head tosses back against Dazai, and he lifts his hips a little, but the slap of skin when he sinks down echoes through the small bathroom. They still.

"Let me help," Dazai whispers and bends down to tug on Chuuya's pants, then on his until they fall to the floor. " A little." His legs stretch, allowing Chuuya both more room and a much deeper angle before one hand settles on his hip, the other stroking the skin on his tummy.

Chuuya tries his best to bounce in his lap but settles on a grind eventually, tiny rocking movements that push Dazai's cock straight into his prostate. The only thing Dazai assists him with is occasionally helping with the slide, avoiding any unnecessary noise.

Looking back later, Dazai admits he gets a bit carried away playing with Chuuya, torturing his nipples, and avoiding his cock because that would be too easy, and the interesting thing about the two of them is that it's everything but. He only decides to put an end to the game, when there's the sound of footsteps outside the door. Yes, Dazai enjoys walking a fine line, but the thread is getting a bit thin to support them both. It takes three firm strokes from tip to bottom while pulling Chuuya down on his cock to make the pleasure snap.

Chuuya loves enjoying himself, but he's a team player, so he continues his rhythm even when he starts trembling from oversensitivity. Then, taking mercy, Dazai pulls them back to their feet, against the sink, and finishes as he watches Chuuya bite his hand to muffle his lovely

moans.

They didn't use a condom — a development that happened last week after getting tested, so the clean-up is a bit messier. However, it also makes Dazai aware of the silent tremor still running through Chuuya's thighs as he wipes him down.

"Hey," he murmurs, touching his arm. "Is something wrong?"

Chuuya doesn't look at him when he pulls up his pants and huffs out a, "Everything's fine."

"Chuuya."

"Dazai."

"You're shaking."

"That happens sometimes," Chuuya whisper-mutters and lightly kicks his leg. "Will you shut up now? I'm okay."

But Chuuya has been quiet. Quieter than usual. And Dazai feels something like a dread blossom in his chest — a very foreign, bizarre feeling. "Did I hurt you?" Was it his leg? He tries not to stretch it too much when they're together, even when Chuuya always says it's okay, but what if Dazai went too far this time? What if he —

"For fuck's sake, no." Chuuya's mild annoyance has bled into a glare that cuts. "I'm *fine*."

Dazai has always been good at reading people, their body language, the lilt of their voice. Right now, his brain and Chuuya are sending him puzzlingly mixed signals.

"Tell me," Dazai says, "if I ever —"

"What? Hurt me? Jesus, Dazai, I've done this enough times to know how to voice the things I like. Now, get out and make sure that no one sees that I'm still in here."

Dazai has somehow made a habit of kissing Chuuya's shoulder after they're done — something about it feels cathartic — but he'd probably get his head bitten off if he did that right now, so after he makes sure he doesn't look like he just had a quickie in the bathroom, Dazai cautiously opens the door and slips out when the coast is clear.

As he grabs a bottle of water from the fridge, he can't help but scowl

at himself. Chuuya hides a lot of things beneath his cute little au pair boy exterior — that's why Dazai is so drawn to him, and Dazai has been unwrapping them since day one like he unwraps his body every night before going to bed, piece by piece, until the only thing left is the naked, ugly truth. But it seems like he'll have to dig even deeper.

Luckily, he has claws for hands.

Chuuya has been accompanying Gin to her ballet lessons for almost two months now. Usually, he tries to be in and out of there as quickly as possible, spending the time waiting in the car or walking around in the neighborhood and listening to music.

Today is different.

Maybe the stars above aligned somehow, or perhaps it's the fact that he gets laid regularly, but today, after Gin hurries off to change, Chuuya decides to stay and watch. Just for a moment.

It's been a little over ten minutes, the little dancers doing a *rond the jambe* when Kouyou comes to stand next to him. "You dance."

"What?" Chuuya asks, startled.

"You have that look on your face. Like there's nowhere else you'd rather be than on over there yourself."

Oh.

"I —" Chuuya could lie, come up with some bullshit excuse. It would be easier. But dancing has been such an integral part of him for so long that denying it feels wrong. "I did," he eventually replies. "Not anymore."

Kouyou's eyes slowly travel over the length of his body, looking for the thing that's wrong.

Chuuya saves her the trouble. "Posterior ankle impingement. I had a bad fall and fractured it." And then continued to dance, ignoring the pain.

"Ah," she says, and that one word expresses more than enough. "You had to quit?"

"Yeah," Chuuya stares at the wall and sees himself, trying and failing over and over again, "I couldn't even dance *en pointe* anymore." In a

matter of hours, he became worthless as a dancer.

"I'm sorry."

"It's fine." Chuuya was hoping to avoid any walks down the memory lane, but even so, he can't let it ruin his day every time he gets reminded that it happened, right? Life goes on. "I'm used to it now."

"You can stay and watch," Kouyou offers him with a rare smile. "Maybe you won't ever regain what you lost, but you can still have ballet in your life. You don't have to cut it out completely."

As lovely as it sounds, the idea of watching but not being able to dance himself is simply cruel. To him, at least.

"Is that even allowed? Me being here all the time?"

Kouyou scoffs. "This school belongs to my mother. So if I say it's okay, then it's okay."

At that, Chuuya's phone buzzes, and he fishes it out of his pocket, reading the text with a frown.

D: Can you ask what Kouyou's doing after her class when you pick up Gin?

Considering, Chuuya's last text to Dazai was kind of dirty, the abrupt change in topics is... disorienting. Especially because it's about the woman standing right next to him.

"Hey," he says. "What are you doing after this class?"

Kouyou's brows furrow. "I have a lunch break. Why?"

"Cool," Chuuya replies with a shrug, hoping he doesn't sound like he's hitting on her. "Just asking."

C: getting lunch

C: why do you want to know?

D: Reasons, chibi. Reasons.

Those reasons turn out to be Dazai waltzing into the room as soon as it hits three o'clock and the class ends, Yosano on his heels. Even knowing their history, Chuuya can't help but think that the two of them look like a power couple wearing matching black coats. They look hot. (And a small part of Chuuya is oddly proud that at the end

of the day, it's he who crawls into Dazai's bed at night. He alone.)

"What are you doing here?" he asks as soon as they're in earshot, crossing his arms over his chest. "I have a driver."

"I sent him home," Dazai says. "We're taking you to lunch."

It's not a *you* as in only Chuuya, but... he follows Yosano's gaze.

Kouyou's busy leaning down and talking to a young boy, but when he finally turns to run off in the direction of the changing room, she notices the new arrivals and visibly freezes. Then her surprise bleeds into a withering glare.

Yosano winks at Chuuya as she brushes past him, and Dazai's hand lands on his back, gently steering them out of the room.

"You wanna tell me what's that all about?"

"We were in the neighborhood."

That's obviously a lie, and maybe Chuuya's a little annoyed that Dazai's allergic to giving him a straight answer, but his stomach is growling already at the prospect of food, so. "Keep your secrets then."

Gin curiously glances between the four of them when she comes out with her bag, but her presence seems to, at least, diffuse the silent atomic war that's going on between Kouyou and Yosano. It's funny. Not once has Chuuya seen the dance instructor lose her calm during the lesson — something that sounds easier said than done when your students are easily distracted, loud preschoolers who randomly do somersaults instead of listening to your instructions. But all Yosano has to do is smirk to make Kouyou look homicidal. Yet, here she is, still following them to the car.

Glancing sideways at Dazai, Chuuya supposes he knows a thing or two about that.

They pile into Dazai's Lexus. The girls in the backseat with Gin in-between them, and Chuuya riding shotgun, squirming a little when Dazai smoothly grabs the back of his seat to reverse the car. It's not even remotely sexual, and still, his breath hitches a little. Chuuya lets out a forced breath. *Not now.*

"So," he hears Dazai say, "any lunch preferences, Kouyou-san?"

"McDonalds!" Gin exclaims.

"You had McDonalds two days ago," Chuuya says. That argument completely misses its mark as Gin's face lights up. "Yes, and I want another Chicken McNuggie!"

"Too many Chicken McNuggies can make you sick," Kouyou butts in with a gentle smile on her face. "I was going to grab a salad before you lot hijacked me."

Yosano scoffs. "Darling, if you didn't want to be here, then you wouldn't be."

"I only agreed because you blackmailed me —"

"You're so dramatic, Ozaki."

"Don't call me that!"

"Do you prefer darling?"

"All right, ladies," Dazai cuts in, "Caspian has great salads. We're going there."

"That's a great idea." Chuuya nods, fighting off an awkward laugh. "Caspian's salads are... wow."

He has never been to Caspian before.

Kouyou lets out an exasperated sigh behind him. "Fine, but don't make this into a thing."

"I have no idea what you mean," Yosano retorts innocently.

"Please, you make everything into things! And unlike you two, I actually take my job seriously. I don't need you showing up every week."

"I assure you I take my studies to become a surgeon very seriously."

"Is that why you're partying every weekend?"

"Is someone keeping tabs on me?"

The rest of the ride pretty much passes in the same fashion, the two of them bickering like their lives depend on it, though, judging by Yosano's smirk on her lips, it's not necessarily a bad thing.

The restaurant is cozy and intimate, and the table they get seated at offers a beautiful view over Cosmo World, Yokohama's amusement park. And Dazai wasn't lying when he said the salads are good here. They are. To compensate for the lack of McDonalds, Gin gets to have potato wedges. Everyone's happy with their food. Even Kouyou — well, at least until Yosano asks about her New Year's eve plans.

"Why do you want to know?" Kouyou demands with a wary frown.

Yosano's smile doesn't waver, though. "Am I not allowed to? Or do you have secret plans you don't want to talk about?"

"No."

"Perfect, because Dazai here will host a cozy get-together in his new apartment. You should come."

"Consider it a small house warming party," Dazai drawls and takes a lazy sip of his water, "that you're now invited to."

"I told you, I'm not interested in your parties," Kouyou says, stabbing a piece of egg with a glare.

"It will be fun," Chuuya says. "These two aren't as bad as they look."

Yosano nudges her arm with her elbow. "See?"

Chuuya's phone buzzes in his pocket, and he fishes it out to see that it's a text. From Dazai.

D: Not as bad, huh?

Chuuya shoots him a puzzled frown. And gets ignored!

C: don't make me regret saying that

C: remind me again why we are texting when you're sitting right next to me?

D: Because we have to let the two disasters across from us talk it out without interrupting them.

C: oh

C: what's their deal anyway?

D: That's a very long story, chibi.

Chuuya's furrowed brows deepen, and he resists the urge to glare at the bastard. The least he could do is let him in on whatever glaringly obvious past they share.

C: and I have time right now ?????

Even though Chuuya doesn't look, he can feel Dazai's amusement, his thigh lightly pressing against him under the table, warm.

"*Hello*," Yosano's voice cuts through his thoughts. "Could you two please be so polite as to not stare at your phones when you're having lunch with your friends?"

Dazai lifts his hand. "It's work-related."

Yosano rolls her eyes, but she accepts that without arguments, and her accusing stare slides to Chuuya. "Well?"

"My parents," Chuuya lies. "Always needing to know what I'm up to. So curious. You know how it is."

"Oh, come on—"

"If you want to deal with two overprotective fathers who think you're dead in a ditch somewhere as soon as you forget to text for an hour, then be my guest, but since I assume you don't, let me send them a few damn pictures while you —" his fingers wave through the air. "—lead this very important discussion."

Yosano shuts up.

Dazai's thigh presses harder against him.

D: Cute.

C: shut up

C: so i'm listening

D: Kouyou was in the same year as us back then, and they were always competing for everything.

C: oh my god, they were school rivals

D: That is what I said, yes.

Chuuya rolls his eyes. Of course, the vine reference flies right past

Dazai's head. That happens a lot.

C: one day I'll sit you down and teach you about every important thing you missed growing up

C: but moving on —

C: all this drama just because of high school shit?

D: Family politics played a role, too.

D: And a few incidents, but that's not my place to tell.

C: okay

C: so why the sudden u-turn?

D: Chuuya.

D: What does it look like?

And *oh.*

That night, at the club, Yosano told him that they ended their arrangement because she wanted something. Looking up, Chuuya sees that it was actually *someone.*

Well. Chuuya's not going to lie; sometimes, he can be a little slow.

Whatever incident occurred between Yosano and Akiko back then might be cause for their constant word-sparring, but it doesn't stop Kouyou from ending up agreeing to go anyway.

New Year’s Eve sounds more and more promising with each day. Chuuya just hopes it will be better than his last one.

Chapter End Notes

> So I was thinking -- thinking very hard about how to best add all the smut I want in this fic without awkwardly adding it into the fic and I decided that the best course of action is to post separate fics and make it into a series, so keep an eye out for that in the future! I'll mention where it takes place in the A/N, so it shouldn't be too confusing! Thank you as always for reading and commenting <3 Lots of love and we'll see each other soon with another update!

Chapter 9: Happy New Year

Chapter Notes

content warning:
- alcohol

Before the New Year's Eve party, Chuuya has the luxury of being the first one, aside from the family, to see the apartment.

Well, it's more of a penthouse.

High ceilings. Spacious hallways that lead to even bigger rooms. Floor-to-ceiling windows that offer a gorgeous view over Yokohama’s skyline. Black marble floors.

Since day one, Chuuya has been aware that Dazai's family has money. Their house is already proof of that. But walking through his new place and looking at the bizarre paintings on the walls, feels like finding out all over again.

It's money that Chuuya will never have. In another life maybe, where he never got injured and went on to have a thriving career as a ballet dancer because, all humility aside, he was that good. He could have achieved this level of success if only... if only he hadn't been so stupid. If only life had been fair.

Chuuya doesn't dwell on it for too long, not when Dazai pushes him against that strikingly black desk and fucks his worries out of him, makes him forget for a while in all the best ways. Then their lunch turns into another round of christening Dazai's furniture — a chair — and because three orgasms are better than one, they follow it up with sex in the shower.

Moving out might have been excessive for the 100% casual no strings attached thing they have going here, but it was also so worth it. Being allowed to be loud is... good.

By the time the sun sets outside, Chuuya sounds like he just came back from a ten-hour heavy metal concert.

Dazai's on the phone in his super fancy, super-serious office, and Chuuya uses that time to laze around on the bed — gigantic and with sateen sheets — and browse through the course catalog of the

universities in Paris. As great as everything's going at the moment, his au pair year has an expiration date. In ten months, Chuuya will be back home. In ten months, he'll have to have at least some of his plans for the future figured out; a degree, a goal, what he wants to do for the rest of his life.

So, he might as well start now.

Somewhere behind Chuuya, Dazai's voice carries out of the office, telling whoever was on the other line a quick goodbye before the echo of his footsteps comes closer and closer.

The bed dips. Chuuya's ass gets pinched.

"Asshole," he mutters with a half-hearted scowl, scrolling through a seemingly endless list of degrees that seem way too smart for someone like Chuuya.

"What is Chuuya doing?"

He finally tears his eyes away, his throat tightening a little when he sees that Dazai's wearing sweats. Only his sweats. And, obviously, his bandages, but it looks hot in that mysterious, cryptic kind of way.

The bandages are a thing that Chuuya hasn't really asked about, feeling like they haven’t unlocked that level of friendship yet. It's clearly something personal. And Dazai has never breached that topic himself or made a move to get them off. Even an hour ago, in the shower, they stayed on — something that was only possible because there was more than enough space for Dazai not to get soaking wet while pressing Chuuya against the wall.

Sure, Chuuya's more than curious about what's hiding underneath, sometimes a little terrified even, but this is just sex. (And maybe a hint of friendship.) Just sex has no place for this kind of intimacy. That said, Chuuya hopes they can squeeze in another quickie before he leaves.

Dazai pokes his cheek, making Chuuya blink in hazy confusion. "Sorry, what?"

"I asked what you were doing," Dazai replies with a knowing smile, "while you were busy objectifying me."

Chuuya chooses to ignore that comment, hiding the heat flushing down his neck by turning back to the laptop in front of him. "I'm

trying to decide what to study next year. What do you think suits me more. Medicine?" Chuuya gives Dazai a mock-smile. "Or industrial engineering?"

Dazai's heavy gaze all but mentally pushes him down on the bed, as he considers the options. "You in a coverall would make a great picture."

"That's what mechanics wear, idiot. I thought you were supposed to be the smart one?"

Dazai shrugs lazily as he braces his cheek on the palm of his hand, never looking away from him. "Then become that."

If only it were so easy.

Chuuya drops his head, letting out a muffled groan against the sheets. None of the degrees appeal to him. Not even a little bit. And he's supposed to spend the rest of his working days doing something he will probably hate? Or worse, just endure? The thought alone makes him want to curl up in a ball and disappear.

For years, Chuuya worked himself dizzy for one thing and one thing only, and that was ballet. He never even tried to pick up another hobby, another interest, or a subject in school that he liked because he knew he wouldn't need it, not when his future was already planned out. He made sure to pass with decent grades, but that was it. None of it mattered. Everything he carefully built, everything he sacrificed, everything depended on ballet.

And now it's all gone.

Chuuya's left with nothing but a broken body, a hole in his life that seems like it will never fill again, and an empty future.

"Hey," he hears Dazai say, his voice crisp and sharp in contrast to the bleariness in Chuuya's head. A moment later, fingers cup his face and force him to look up again. "You will be okay. No one knows what they're doing with their life when they're fresh out of school."

"All my friends did," Chuuya weakly argues. "Majority of all students do. You did."

"My career was set in stone the day I started school." Dazai's grip tightens ever so slightly, but his thumb that strokes down Chuuya's chin is shockingly soft. "As for your friends and the rest of the

students, 95% of them will change their plans several times before ever deciding what to do. Some never figure it out."

"And what if I'm one of those who never figure it out?"

"Then you just chase after whatever makes you feel most alive," Dazai murmurs, "and do that."

That's pretty in theory but complicated in practice. Not everything can become a profession. The things that make Chuuya gasp in breathless excitement is either unattainable or... nothing that would make his fathers proud.

"Whatever," Chuuya finally says, and when Dazai's hand slips away, he rolls on his back, staring at the ceiling. "I still have a few months to decide. That's a problem for future-me."

Dazai's silent for a few moments. "You know, my university has great programs for international students. You could study here."

Chuuya's heart actually skips a beat. Slowly, he turns to Dazai, raising his brows. "Why would I do that?"

"Because you like Yokohama?"

"Yeah," Chuuya says with a nervous laugh, "I also like Amsterdam, but I'm not planning on going to university there...?"

Dazai's stare doesn't falter. "I doubt you know as many incredible people there as you do here."

On a trip with his parents and ex-boyfriend, Chuuya did meet a very cool dude once who was able to recite random Wikipedia pages by heart —but that's beside the point.

The point being that Dazai's suggestion is absurd. Crazy. Totally ridiculous.

"I can't study in Yokohama."

"What's stopping you?"

"For starters," Chuuya says, "my parents live in Paris?"

"There are these things called airplanes," Dazai deadpans. "Very efficient creations."

"Do you even know how much flights from Paris to Yokohama cost?" When Dazai opens his mouth, Chuuya stops him with a finger. "Wait, no. Don't answer that. To you, it will seem like peanuts, but to me —" He huffs out a breath. "No. I —"

"Chuuya, breathe."

"I am breathing!"

"It was a suggestion," Dazai says. "That's all. Calm down."

"Okay," Chuuya snaps. "Good."

"Perfect," Dazai replies.

"Amazing!" Whatever craving was still lingering in Chuuya's stomach seems to have vanished into the air.

This is so weird. It feels like a breach of their casual policy. Not even a breach, but a fucking leap. Why would Dazai even suggest something so... so —

Dazai, of all people!

Chuuya inhales a deep breath and gets off the bed, trying to remember where the fuck he lost all of his clothes. "I have to go. It's getting late."

"I'll drive you."

"It's fine. I can call Hatori." The family driver.

"Chuuya," he hears Dazai says as he picks up his pants from the floor in the hallway, "can you slow down for a moment and just talk to me?"

"There is nothing to talk about."

"You're acting like I just suggested we should adopt children."

Well, that's because it's on the same level of couple-ness!

Before Chuuya can even blink, Dazai's in front of him, placing his hands on his shoulders. "It was a suggestion. That's it."

Just a suggestion.

"A suggestion," Chuuya echoes and swallows. "Okay. Fine. I can live

with that."

"Then let me drive you home."

Well...

With a nod, Chuuya slips out of Dazai's grip and walks down the hallway, searching for his other clothing pieces. "If it's not too much of a bother."

"It isn't."

Perfect.

After getting dressed, they pile into Dazai's Lexus. Radio music fills the silence. Everything is fine. (Except there's this feeling in Chuuya's stomach that says it's not. Not really.)

The next day, a few hours before Chuuya's supposed to be at Dazai's for the party, he finds himself spread out on the floor like a starfish, watching the shadows his hand produces above him.

When his parents first mentioned adopting him after having him live with them for a while, Chuuya replied with, "what's the catch?" Because there always was one. A catch. His first foster family had wanted the benefits that come with taking in poor, helpless kids. His second one had used him as a punching bag. The one before Arthur and Paul had told him they'd think about making his stay permanent, but only if he stopped glaring so much, if he talked more during dinners, and only if he stopped sleeping with a knife under his pillow because that wasn't polite.

It didn't take him long to figure out that to survive, he had to be useful. People are less hard on you when they know they get something out of it. Easy. So when both Arthur and Paul's nervous smiles fell into something sad and heavy, Chuuya didn't understand.

It didn't make sense.

Sometimes, it doesn't.

Then Chuuya's boyfriend, the person he considered his soulmate and best friend, cheated on him because he "wasn't the same confident and fun boy he fell in love with anymore," and he knew that the song would always remain the same. There are exceptions — his fathers are

— but as far as Chuuya's concerned, everyone else is always looking for something to take. So when Dazai makes a simple suggestion, Chuuya overthinks. A lot.

Maybe it was just that, a suggestion, but Dazai isn't a guy who does anything simply, nor does he suggest. He takes.

Chuuya lets out a pitiful sigh and scrubs a hand across his face. Talking to someone about this would make this so much easier, but as it is, his options are very limited. He's pretty sure his relationship with Tachihara doesn't run deep enough for this kind of topic yet and considering they had sex as well, it just doesn't seem like the best idea to say, "Hey, so what do you think Dazai wants from me?" while Chuuya's spotting him bench pressing.

No.

Not Tachihara.

For obvious reasons, everyone in this house is out of the question too.

That leaves... Yosano?

It's honestly not that bad of an idea since she's Dazai's best friend and will know more about him than some outsider, but it also means her loyalties belong to him. Chuuya doesn't want everything he says or asks to get back to Dazai later.

Then again, she is his only option.

Chuuya gets out his phone and clicks on the group chat Dazai added him to after the Halloween party, then taps Yosano's contact. It rings two times before she picks up with a bright, "Yes?"

"Hi," he says, "it's Chuuya."

"I am aware of that, darling."

"I was wondering if you could, uh, do my hair for tonight." It's a shitty excuse, but Chuuya can't be bothered to come up with something better. Yosano will learn that it's not about the hair soon enough anyway. "Do you happen to be good at that?"

"Yes," she replies, and even though Chuuya can't see her, he knows she's smirking, "I happen to be marvelous at everything I do. What are you thinking of?"

"A... sexy ponytail?"

"Spicy," Yosano comments idly. "I like that. Be here at nine. I'll send you the address."

"Great. Thank you so much, Yosano-san."

"Thank me when you get here. See you in a bit, darling."

According to google maps, Yosano only lives one block away from the university clinic in an elegant building complex. Entering, Chuuya sees that it's not as extravagant as Dazai's new place, but the foyer already screams wealthy, so it's more than enough. Like with the call, Yosano's door swings open for him after a few seconds, and she beckons him in with a smile.

"Make yourself at home." She leads Chuuya to her bedroom without much ado. "I promised Ozaki I'd pick her up, so I'll invite you for coffee and cake another time."

Chuuya can't help but waggle his eyebrows as he sits down at her vanity table. "You did?"

"Eyes front," Yosano orders, gathering his hair in her hand and starting to brush it. "Of course, I did. Did you have doubts?"

"Well, Kouyou didn't exactly seem very thrilled about the idea of coming to the party, so I guess?"

In the mirror, he sees a small smile on Yosano's lips, subtle but loud. "I happen to be good at seeing through people's facades."

Chuuya straightens his shoulders, biting his lip. "Speaking of facades... Can you help me understand some things about Dazai?"

It's not so much surprise in her gaze, but a simple *ah* moment that passes over it. "Some things could mean everything from why he cuts all his food into tiny pieces to why he wears bandages. You'll have to be more specific than that."

"Okay." Chuuya clears his throat and rephrases the sentence in his head. "Did he ever date anyone? Like, aside from your fake relationship. Was there ever anyone else?"

"Nothing serious," Yosano says. "No."

"So he isn't a relationship type of guy," Chuuya concludes loudly.

Yosano's movements behind him pause for a moment before she continues, her eyes sharp. "This is not what I said. He couldn't have dated someone even if he wanted to because it would have sabotaged our act. Would you want to date someone who's pretending to be in a relationship with his best friend?"

"...no."

"See." Yosano waves her hand. "Don't jump to conclusions, Chuuya-kun. Now, do I need to ask why you're so interested in all this?"

His brows furrow. "Dazai really hasn't told you?" They're best friends. Chuuya assumed that Yosano would be the exception to the *this is supposed to stay a secret* rule.

"Tell me what?"

"What we've been, uh, kind of, hooking up."

She digests that information without so much as blinking. "Dazai didn't tell me," Yosano says after a moment of silence. "If you entrust him with something, then that secret is safe with him."

He supposes that's good to know.

"So," she continues, "you now want to know if there's room for something more serious?"

"What? Oh god, no." Chuuya lets out a hoarse laugh, shaking his head. "Don't get me wrong. It's great, and all, but I'm not looking for anything more than fun. I'm only here until October, and I don't want my au pair year to turn into some cheesy dramedy where I fall in love with my host brother."

He sees Yosano frown ever so slightly. "So why are you asking?"

"Sometimes, he confuses me. Yesterday, he suggested I could go to college here. In Yokohama." Chuuya finds her eyes in the mirror. "That's crazy, right?"

"You don't like Yokohama?"

Chuuya frowns. "Of course, I do. Just... moving here for several years seems a bit drastic."

"I get that," Yosano says then, shoulders dropping a little, "and I get why it confuses you, but knowing Dazai, he could have had a

thousand reasons to make that suggestion and not mean what you think it does."

"Okay." Yosano steps back behind him, and Chuuya admires the ponytail on his head, making his face look sharp and elegant, cheekbones high. He looks hot. "Because I want us to be on the same page, and I thought we were, but..." He trails off with a shrug. Asking someone to stay doesn't exactly scream casual.

"Tell him that."

"I did! Every time I do, he always manages to take the piss out of it, though."

Yosano lets out a quiet chuckle. "Sounds like Dazai." Her fingers tug at the collar of Chuuya's oversized blazer. "Okay, you look smoking, and one of these days, we're going to go shopping together, so you won't have to lie about needing me to do your hair anymore to talk about Dazai."

Chuuya's grin turns sheepish. "Sorry?"

"It's fine. Now come on because Ozaki won't be as forgiving if she has to wait for us."

The city is packed, honking cars and dressed up people everywhere ready to celebrate the new year, so they arrive a few minutes late, though when Kouyou spots Chuuya waving at her, she schools her expression into something less hostile.

Chuuya feels a little like Switzerland between the two of them, but, at least, they're all in one piece when the car pulls to a stop in front of Dazai's building. Something else replaces the mild amusement in his stomach. He's kind of nervous to see Dazai.

They texted, yes, but exchanging a few messages about whether Chuuya arrived safely in his room without the entire family noticed he got dicked down several times is much more different than actually seeing him again after he more or less made Chuuya freak out last time.

For once, the little party actually is little. The music running is just loud enough to have a conversation without yelling, and Chuuya recognizes every face he sees. When Dazai lets them in, Chuuya's brain completely gives up on working because when Dazai moves to give him a hug, Chuuya tries to give him a fist bump.

A fucking fist bump.

"Um," he all but stammers out, deliberately not looking at the girls' faces, "I don't know why I did that. Sorry." Internally, Chuuya has already jumped off this very building 10 times, but he still forces himself to hug Dazai, who feels more tense than usual against him before Chuuya excuses himself to get drinks in the kitchen.

Dazai doesn't follow him.

This calls for alcohol. So much alcohol.

By now, he has seen most of Dazai's friends more than enough times to feel comfortable greeting them with a glass of champagne between his lips. No one bats an eye.

Correction, almost no one.

Oda —Chuuya secretly refers to him as the gentle giant— places his palm on his shoulder, shooting him a quirked brow. "Woah, don't overestimate these. They're sweet but dangerous."

"I've drunk champagne before," Chuuya replies, trying to ignore how his very big, very warm hand on him makes him feel by stretching his mouth into a playful grin, "and it's not the only thing that's sweet but dangerous."

Oda either chooses to ignore that little comment, or it flies past his head. "Then, at least, drink enough water."

"Duh." Seriously, what's wrong with him today? "Hey, how's that book of yours coming along?"

"It's... going." Oda makes a face. "Truth be told, I've recently hit an impasse, and now I'm considering deleting every word and starting over again."

Just a second ago, Chuuya was thinking how much easier his life would be if he had just been born a writer. No career-ending injuries. No pain. No identity crises because you built your whole life on it. Seems like it's not that easy either, though.

Chuuya awkwardly claps Oda's arms. "I'm sure you'll figure it out. I don't know much about writing, and I know it's kind of personal, but if you want, I could still take a look. Sometimes an outsider view can help."

It's probably the champagne that makes Chuuya give out advice like he has any idea what he's talking about, but to his surprise, Oda smiles. "Dazai wasn't lying when he said you are a special one."

"Uh," Chuuya blinks and scratches the back of his neck, "Dazai seems to be saying a lot of things these days."

"Hey, it's not often you hear something like that from him."

"But he has all these friends," Chuuya glances around the room, "so it can't be that much of a rarity, right?"

"And how often do all these friends get to see him when he disappears?" When Chuuya curiously tilts his head, Oda lets out a sigh. "Don't mind me. All I'm saying is that your presence has been good. For everyone. And I will take you up on that offer, but first, I need to —" Oda motions somewhere in the other direction, and Chuuya nods, letting him escape this conversation.

Okay, now he's confused *and* tipsy. *Whatever,* Chuuya thinks to himself and refills his glass.

One hour later, he's in the bathroom and giggling as he looks into the mirror and notices how fucking drunk he is. He takes a few selfies to capture the moment. To be fair, though, he has all the reasons to be!

They're a little more than an hour away from the new year, and Chuuya hasn't exchanged a single word with Dazai ever since that embarrassing greeting! And okay, it's partly his fault, because he made sure to be in a super-duper interesting conversation with someone else every time Dazai was close by, but damn it, Dazai can be very persistent if he wants to be, so it's not something that would usually stop him.

But he never even tried to approach Chuuya.

So now Chuuya's just completely trashed. And even more confused. This is why he swore off relationships for the next ten years. They're so complicated. They fuck with your head and then leave you crying yourself to sleep because your boyfriend didn't like you being upset about losing your entire future, so he, obviously, went ahead and cheated on you. Chuuya can't imagine going through the same thing again even if he wanted to.

And yet, here he is, pouting into his camera because his fuck buddy slash friend slash host brother has been ignoring him all evening long

when all Chuuya wants to do right now is hear Dazai's voice. It's because Dazai — aside from being responsible for many amazing orgasms — is also Chuuya's friend. And he likes his friends.

(And because Chuuya gets extremely clingy when he's drunk.)

He all but stumbles out of the fancy bathroom (with 48 new selfies) and flops down on the couch where Yosano, Kouyou, and Higuchi are sitting. Definitely *not* because it offers a great view over the patio where Dazai's currently having a smoke with Oda.

"Hey there, cowboy," he hears Yosano say, "do you want a glass of water?"

"Mm, sure."

He's handed a glass of water, so he lifts it to his mouth, drinking slowly. It's exceptional water. Maybe if he had listened to Oda, he wouldn't be so fucking drunk right now.

Oh well.

One of the girls says something, but all he hears is their laughter, so he turns to frown at them. "What's so funny?"

"You," Higuchi replies, grinning.

Kouyou looks a little concerned. "He's not going back to the Tsushima's like that, right?"

"God no," Yosano supplies. "Dazai will probably let him sleep here."

"Oi, I'm right here," Chuuya snaps and sets down the glass of water on the coffee table. "I'm perfectly fine to go home."

"Darling, please believe me when I say you aren't."

Chuuya lets out a vexed breath.

For some reason, Kouyou gets up and gently grabs his arm, dragging him to his feet. "I can't watch this. Let's get some food into you, okay?"

"Whatever," Chuuya slurs, only going along with the plan because the prospect of food sounds criminally good right now. "'s all Dazai's fault."

"Huh?"

"Dazai," Chuuya says, probably louder than he should. "You know that bastard, right?"

"I do." He doesn't understand why Kouyou's laughing. Nothing about this is funny! "Yes."

"If he just had kept his stupid mouth shu—" He cuts himself off when Kouyou offers him a bowl with delicious-looking soba noodles, forgetting what he was going on about for a few blissful moments. "This is the best thing I have ever tasted," he says eventually, "like *ever*."

"Don't overeat, or you'll get sick. And drink more water."

"Thank you, mom," Chuuya grumbles, then remembers where he trailed off. This is a very important conversation, after all. "You know, I feel like Dazai and Yosano are the evil handsome, irresistibly charming best friends, and we are their victims. Their poor ginger-haired victims!"

Kouyou looks at him like he's lost his damn marbles, so he relents. "Okay, okay, Yosano's not that bad — seriously! Have you seen this ponytail?" He whips his head back and forth for emphasis. "That's her doing!"

"That's great, Chuuya."

"But Dazai! Dazai is so..."

"Dazai is what?" says a voice behind him, and funny, it almost sounds like him, too.

Wait.

Frowning, Chuuya realizes it's not Kouyou who said that, so he turns around and, oh, speak of the devil. A devil that's tall and gorgeous with those smoldering eyes that always seem to see everything that goes through his head. A devil that screams ten shades of complicated.

"Dazai is..." Chuuya starts again, staring back up at him and refusing to back down, "very mean."

"And Chuuya seems to be very drunk," Dazai remarks before giving Kouyou a smile. "Thank you for taking care of him. I've got him now." Then he turns back to Chuuya, hooking a finger in the collar of his blazer. "Now, what should we do with you?"

Of all the things that popped into Chuuya's mind at that question, being forced to swallow a pain killer and drink even more water wasn't one of them.

"First, you ignore me all evening," Chuuya complains after his third glass, "then you make me miss the new year!"

"Come on, finish this," Dazai tells him, pushing his hands so that they lift the water to his mouth. "I wasn't ignoring you. I was trying to give you space."

"And why would I need that?!"

"You're not very hard to read, chibi," Dazai says with an infuriatingly gentle smile. "And we're not missing the new year. We still have ten minutes."

That makes Chuuya's head snap up. Come to think of it, he's pretty sure he would have noticed if it had turned 12 already.

"Can we go and watch, or will you force me to go to sleep?"

Dazai rolls his eyes but helps him get to his feet. "You'll thank me tomorrow. Trust me."

Chuuya's too busy dragging them down the hallway and out to the patio, where most of their friends have already gathered to watch.

Every damn year, his heart races like crazy in his chest, even though, technically, it's just some stupid numbers changing. Still. It's exciting.

Too late, Chuuya also notices that it's fucking cold, and he's out here, a decent patch of skin exposed to the cold. He puts his arms around himself, hoping it will warm him up when he feels a nudge against his elbow. Behind him, Dazai holds open his coat in a silent offer.

A thick, warm coat.

He doesn't say anything when he lets Dazai wrap him in it, his arms settling around Chuuya's waist and pulling him even closer until they're perfectly molded to each other.

A heartfelt sigh escapes Chuuya.

They never stay longer in bed than necessary when they fuck. They don't cuddle or hold hands, so this is a new and unfamiliar terrain, but it feels so, so excruciatingly good that Chuuya could cry right now.

It's one of the few things he does miss about relationships. Getting to cling to someone all the time. Falling asleep against a warm chest. The small, simple gestures and touches.

But are these things worth all that stupid fucking pain?

For now, Chuuya chooses to push that question off and instead wiggles closer into Dazai's heat.

He can have this for one night.

Dazai lifts his left arm and shows him the watch around his wrist. "One minute left," he murmurs into his ear.

Chuuya's insides tumble and dance.

"You know, in Europe, we have this tradition," he finds himself saying, a little breathless, "where you kiss someone when the clock strikes twelve."

"Mm, too bad we're in Japan." Then Dazai's soft laugh rumbles against his back, though, and Chuuya hates how much he likes that sound. "Are you asking me to be your New Year's kiss, Chuuya?"

If he has the opportunity to share his first kiss of the new year with someone like Dazai, then he might as well take it, right? And yeah, everyone will probably see them and put two and two together, but fuck all of that. Chuuya will deal with it tomorrow when he's sober.

Plus, he really wants to kiss Dazai right now.

"Yeah."

The hand on his hips spin him in place so that Chuuya can fist his hands in Dazai's shirt and stare up at him as Dazai slowly, smiling, counts down. "Five... four... three..." He cups Chuuya's chin, holding him in place. "Two.." As their lips crash together, the one gets forgotten.

Around them, the world erupts into noises, whooping, yelling, the sound of honking cars, and fireworks booming in the sky above, but all Chuuya can focus on is the steady beat of Dazai's heart against him.

He presses up on his tiptoes, tugging Dazai closer, letting him part his mouth with his tongue and make the kiss deeper because in the end, try as he might, Chuuya simply can't deny that this? It feels good.

Maybe even better than everything else he's ever had so far.

Next to them, someone whoops again, and Chuuya's pretty sure it's not about the new year this time, but he doesn't pay them any mind, not when Dazai's hands slowly slide up the length of his back, making him shiver. Others seeing them won't change anything. It doesn't matter.

Dazai's cheeks are flushed from the cold, eyes blown wide, yet his voice is aggravating calm when he says, "Happy new year, Chuuya."

"Happy new year." Chuuya snags the finger that's tracing his jaw and tries his best not to look too dopey. "Let's make this a good one."

Because god was the last one awful.

"It will be everything you've ever imagined," Dazai tells him, "and so much more."

Chuuya cocks his head, still playing with Dazai's finger. "Yeah, and how do you know that?"

"Because I'm Dazai Osamu, and I know everything."

It's the ridiculous god-complex Chuuya would claim to loathe if it didn't make him grin so fucking hard right now. "Ugh, why do I put up with you?"

Before he gets to hear the reply — something obnoxious, he's sure — Ranpo bursts their little bubble by grabbing both their arms. "Making eyes at each other *later*," he exclaims over the noise. "Pictures *now*."

So they end up being squeezed into the group of people huddling together while Higuchi places her phone on one of the high-tables, then sprints back before the flash goes off.

Chuuya's trying not to roll his eyes when Ranpo elbows Dazai and murmurs a comment about getting the boy. Little do they know, this has been going on for a while now.

Then finally, the phone flashes, and the moment, Chuuya grinning brightly as if he's never known any pain, Dazai's arm, warm and reassuring around his waist, becomes endless. At least, on someone's camera.

They take more pictures, though by the time the majority of people are passed out, and it's time to call it a night, Chuuya has forgotten

most of them, head-heavy with booze and dragging exhaustion. The only ones still awake are Yosano, Kouyou, and Dazai, having spent the last hour just sitting in the kitchen and talking, though when Kouyou yawns for the fifth time in one minute, Dazai nods his head down the hall. "You two can sleep in the guest room."

She stands up without much of a reaction except silent resignation. "Only because I'm too tired to argue right now."

Funny, considering she was happily sitting in Yosano's lap not even two hours ago.

"Good night, boys. Don't be too loud." Yosano winks and follows Kouyou.

Even after all this time, Chuuya's stomach still flutters when he's left alone with Dazai. Everything always feels more with him, intensified somehow. Even silence.

"You could join them," Dazai offers as he gets up and starts clearing away empty glasses. "The bed is big enough for all three of you."

Chuuya huffs. "Yeah, no thanks. I do not want my eyes scratched out."

"I'm sure there's still some space left on the couch."

"Don't be fucking stupid." He doesn't want Tanizaki slobbering all over him in his sleep.

"Then I guess you're stuck with me," Dazai says softly.

It sounds strange when you consider they've done far more "outrageous" things than share a fucking bed, but Chuuya supposes this is different than sex. And then there's obviously the suggestion thing, they still haven't talked about.

Chuuya swallows his nerves and holds up his hand to Dazai until he pulls him to his feet. They end up a breath away from each other. "I guess I am," he murmurs before offering him a crooked smile. "Luckily, you look strangely similar to this guy who has been giving me mind-blowing orgasms for the past two months."

"Exploiting people for orgasms? I'm appalled."

"He offered," Chuuya jokes and loops his arms around Dazai's neck, shrugging. "Who am I to say no?"

"Just wait until Paul and Arthur hear about this ~."

Chuuya's protests get cut off when Dazai picks him up, the threats on his tongue melting into shrieking laughter as Dazai carries him into his bedroom and slam-dunks him on the bed like he weighs nothing.

"Unfair, you little bitch —"

"Who's really little here, huh?"

Chuuya grabs the nearest pillow and flings at him, but Dazai manages to catch it, tossing it aside carelessly before pinning Chuuya's wrists against the mattress. "I'm listening?"

"Still you," Chuuya snaps, but even to his own ears, his voice sounds breathless. Damn that bastard for knowing exactly how to push his buttons. "I still don't understand why my parents like you so much, by the way."

Dazai has become a regular guest in their facetime calls since every time they call, he's nearby. (And they seem to be happy that Chuuya has found such a great *friend*.)

"I'm a delight to be around," Dazai says. "Of course, they like me."

"You just know what to say to make them like you," Chuuya retorts. He's already being pinned down here; he doesn't need to give Dazai the last word too.

"I don't see the difference."

"Well, there is one." His hips rock up a bit, but Dazai's quick to push Chuuya back down, eliciting a small, frustrated noise in the back of his throat. Right now, being under that fucking jerk feels like someone's dangling a delicious strip of bacon right in front of his nose but not allowing him to have a taste. Well, maybe bacon isn't the right word. Dazai's better than bacon. The point is Chuuya wants something, *anything* from him, but Dazai's in one of his annoying "let's tease the shit out of Chuuya" moods.

Dazai smiles knowingly. "Not if the results are the same."

Hah?

Chuuya's honestly not even sure what they're talking about anymore, so he hums deeply as if considering the argument. "If I agree with you,

will you skip the whole foreplay thing and just fuck me already?"

Funny how time moves in circles because here they are, in Dazai's brand new penthouse, and still, they'll have to be quiet if they don't want all of their friends to hear what they're up to. Why lie and pretend that he doesn't find that hot, though? The added layer of danger makes everything more int—

"This isn't foreplay."

Chuuya blinks. "Wait, what?"

"I'm not fucking you tonight," Dazai murmurs, his voice way too deep and raspy to deliver such disappointing news.

"You're not?" He wiggles helplessly, feeling like he just got thrown into cold water with his clothes on. "Do you want me... to fuck you?" Chuuya usually prefers to bottom, but hey, he wouldn't make switching things up if that's what Dazai wants.

Except Dazai shakes his head. Again. "You're way too drunk."

"What? I'm not drunk."

"Chuuya."

"Dazai," he echoes stubbornly. "You made me drink, like, two liters of water. I'm fine, I swear."

"I did that, so your tomorrow will feel slightly less painful," Dazai says idly. "The only thing that makes you sober up is time, and since you were still drinking an hour ago, it's not looking good for you."

Chuuya’s mouth pulls down into a pout. “Then why did you bother teasing me?!”

“Because it’s fun?”

Wiggling out of his grip, Chuuya sighs sadly and gets up. “I guess, I guess I’ll only have to wash my face then."

“How inconvenient.”

Chuuya leaves with a snort.

Maybe it's better this way. he doesn't need the embarrassment of not being able to get it up.

The luke-warm shower he takes helps a little with the low buzz that settled in his stomach under Dazai's weight, and instead reminds him of just how much alcohol he inhaled over the last few hours. By the time he's finished, his eyelids feel like they weigh a thousand tons.

Dazai's changing when he walks back into the room, offering Chuuya a great view of his back.

His naked back.

"Do you have a shirt?" he mumbles. "Kind of forgot to bring sleeping clothes."

Nodding, Dazai grabs one of his shirts and tosses it to him wordlessly. Chuuya catches it and starts stripping, feeling painfully awkward as he does, not because of his nudity but because the silence between them feels oppressive, bearing down on his chest like a few dozen pounds of bricks. He grabs his phone when he crawls under the sheets.

There are still a couple of hours left in France until midnight, but his fathers already sent him messages in their group chat, and Chuuya's not really surprised to see that he replied with a thousand typos and emojis. He also sent them those pictures they took outside.

His throat goes a little dry as he swipes through them and stops on one picture in particular. Their little group squeezed together, nothing special, except that Chuuya's not grinning at the camera but at Dazai. Dazai's returning his smile with something less drunk but just as ferocious. His hand settled on Chuuya's bare stomach. Not an inch of space left.

After staring at it for way too long, Chuuya forces himself to read further. Arthur specifically replied with a "👀👍👍🤍🤍🤍" to that one.

Great.

Just great.

The bed dips next to him, and he quickly leaves the chat, casting a glance to where Dazai lies down. It takes him a moment to notice that something feels off — and then another to realize that it's the bandages. Or the lack thereof.

It shouldn't be surprising; Dazai has to let his skin breathe at some point during the day, and it makes sense that he'd do it at night.

Chuuya just didn't expect Dazai to do it with *him*.

Though, not even a moment later, Dazai switches the light off, making him stare at his dark silhouette. "You don't need it sleep, do you?"

"What am I? Twelve?" Chuuya forces himself to say with a snort.

"Considering your height, maybe."

"Asshole." Chuuya kicks him under the covers, but he barely reaches him with all the space that's left between them. It's so strange. One moment, Dazai makes sure to stay behind the line they've drawn; the next, he leaps over it. "No, I don't need light to sleep. I like it dark for as long as possible."

Dazai shifts, settling in somewhere across from him. "Then I guess I will try not to wake you in the morning," he finally says. "Wouldn't want a sleep-deprived, hungover chibi haunting me."

Chuuya ignores the last comment in favor of frowning into the darkness. "How the fuck do you always get up so early when you go to sleep the same time as me?" If not, later. Back at his family's, Chuuya always stumbled into him at the ass crack of dawn. No matter what time, Dazai was always awake.

"I don't sleep much," Dazai tells him, "so getting up is easier than lying in bed for hours."

"Oh. You're insomniac?"

"Yes, that's what they call it."

It feels like something Chuuya should have known at this point in their relationship — friendship — thing. And then it occurs to him that he never asked.

"That must suck," Chuuya murmurs. Sleeping is his third favorite thing to do in the world. He can't imagine going to bed night after night and just not... being able to fall asleep. "But there's medicine for that, right?"

Dazai hums. "It often doesn't help." Chuuya yawns, and when Dazai speaks again, he can imagine him smiling a little. "Good night, Chuuya."

"—ight, Dazai."

He wraps his arms around the pillow under him and lets out a sigh. This doesn't feel so bad, actually. It's okay.

Except that five minutes later, Chuuya's still awake.

He shifts onto his back. Maybe it's just the position. Usually, he sleeps spread out across the entire bed like a starfish, but obviously, that's not possible right now.

Any minute now, sleep will descend over him —

Nothing.

Chuuya huffs quietly, annoyed that the drunken sleepiness he felt throughout the last few hours has vanished all of a sudden. In his most critical moment!

Again, he turns. Away from Dazai. Heart racing all of a sudden.

God, this is so annoying.

After another eternity of not sleeping, Chuuya's just about ready to fling himself out of the window. He —

"Chuuya."

Oh. That's Dazai.

He turns his head even though it's too dark to make out anything. "Yeah?"

"Count to one hundred."

"I already tried!"

He hears Dazai open his mouth, but the silence lingers, making him scowl in suspicion.

"What?" he whisper-snaps. "Spit it out!"

"You're going to freak out."

Chuuya would like to argue that he would not, but then again, the last few days speak for themselves. "Just say it."

"Chuuya, no offense, but I'm too comfortable right now to chase after you when you run for the hills."

Wow.

He supposes he deserves that a little.

"Fine," Chuuya says and sighs dramatically, turning away from him again. "Then I guess I'll just lie here and annoy the fuck out of you for the rest of the night."

Dazai doesn't reply, and for a while, Chuuya thinks this is it, annoyed at himself and the jerk next to him, but then without any warning, two arms slide around his waist and pull him back into a solid, warm chest. "Freaking out yet?"

"Maybe," Chuuya breathes out but doesn't move away. The opposite, actually. Dazai's skin is so hot that it would be criminal not to press back and feel that toe-curling heat envelop him like a second blanket.

The arms around him tighten.

From personal experience, Chuuya knows that this isn't as much cuddling as it is Dazai holding him.

"Your brain releases oxytocin when someone holds you," Dazai murmurs, breath soft against his neck. "It has a calming effect on your body; makes you fall asleep faster."

Chuuya sighs a little dreamily. Yeah, it definitely works. "Can we talk —" He yawns — "—bout it... tomorrow...?"

Dazai doesn't ask what it means. "Whatever you want, love."

"Mmm."

This time, he drifts off in mere seconds. The last thought on Chuuya's mind is a question. He wonders if someone ever held Dazai to help him fall asleep.

Chapter 10: This Path Has More Than One Exit

Chapter Notes

content warnings:
- explicit sexual content
- mention of a drug overdose/suicide attempt

Chuuya snores.

Out of all the little truths Dazai could have gotten wrong about him, it's this one. He snores, arms spread out, mouth slightly agape, chest rising and falling peacefully with every new grunting sound.

Dazai's fascinated. Not by the act itself. That is annoying, though once Dazai closes his eyes and pretends he's listening to the sound of the sea, it's half as bad.

No, what fascinates Dazai is the fact that he didn't see it coming. Granted, that might have been his own mistake. When thinking of snoring, the image of a middle-aged drunkard rotting away on the couch in a white tank top comes to his mind. Not Chuuya. Lithe, graceful Chuuya who carries himself like a black swan with each step. But, Dazai supposes that is the danger of stereotyping, and even a man like him can fall into that trap sometimes.

Next to him, Chuuya smacks his lips, grumbles something under his breath, and then turns to his side, one hand reaching out to grab the nearest thing — which happens to be Dazai's arm — and curling into a ball.

Cute.

Dazai avoids lying in one place and doing nothing when he can; it gives him too much time to think, but right now, getting up would be criminal. Chuuya looks too comfortable to ruin that.

So Dazai exhales and squeezes his eyes shut again, finding that place that's not sleeping, but not consciousness either, and lets himself doze. Just for a few minutes.

When Chuuya cracks his eyes open the following day, the room spins a little. His head feels heavy, throat dry. Not for the first time in his life, he curses past him for being such a brat.

He's known for years that his body needs less alcohol than the average 18-year-old-guy, and still, every damn time, he makes the same fucking mistake. Chuuya tries to lift his head. That's when he notices that his hands are clutching something. An arm. Dazai's arm.

Some of last night's memories flash through his mind. The midnight kiss. An unholy amount of shots. Cuddling.

Oh.

"Chuuya?"

Did he say that out loud?

"Hi," he murmurs and sheepishly unclenches his fingers. "Morning."

Dazai uses his free hand to rub across his face before glancing at him. "You talk in your sleep."

"Sorry," Chuuya turns and grabs the bottle standing on the nightstand, downing half of it in one go, then flopping back on the sheets with a sigh, "I dream a lot, and sometimes words slip out."

Dazai looks more amused than annoyed. "It's fine. It was very insightful."

"I didn't say something weird, did I?" He's always been somewhat scared that one day while sharing a bed with someone, he'd have a sex dream and make noises.

"No. Did you dream of anything weird?"

Chuuya frowns, trying to remember. "I think someone kept chasing me. Cops or something. I dream of that a lot, though, so no?"

"You just kept mumbling random words. It was funny."

"My ex used to say it was annoying as fuck," Chuuya says with a huff of laughter. "The talking and the snoring. Did I snore?"

He lets out a little breath when he feels Dazai's finger touch his bare thigh, slowly traveling up the length of it in soft, stroking motions. "No."

"Ha," Chuuya grins, "take that, Romaine."

"*Romaine*?"

"The ex in question —" Dazai's hand slips under the oversized shirt he's wearing; Chuuya feels his breath hitch at the featherlight touch on his tummy. "— though, I'd rather not talk about, uh, him right now."

"Agreed," Dazai says and pulls him forward with his hand around his waist, making Chuuya's heart stutter and spike all at once. With a firm grip on his back, Dazai kisses him, gentle and slow and maddening, refusing to give in to Chuuya's pathetic attempts at deepening the kiss.

When he tries to slide his fingers in Dazai's hair — and get him closer, damn it — Dazai catches his wrist and rolls them over instead until he's above him, eyes dark and huge as he tsks. "Patience is a virtue, Chuuya."

"Fuck virtue," he breathes out. "Who cares about that?"

"I do, and since you want me to fuck you, you do as well."

Sometimes Chuuya wishes he could be that kind of person who takes things slow, savors them like a glass of red wine, but it's not who he is. When he wants something, it's like a physical craving, like it will tear him apart from the inside if he doesn't listen.

Chuuya swallows. "What if I can't?"

"Of course, you can." Dazai slowly intertwines their hands, then presses them down against the mattress. His mouth lowers until Chuuya can feel his warm breath ghost across his neck. "I can teach you how to be patient." Chuuya's mouthparts on a breathless gasp as Dazai bites the delicate skin, not gentle, before sucking, his tongue lavishing the spot with obscene finesse.

"If you, fuck, leave me a hickey, I'll kill you —"

He feels more than sees the stretch of an amused smile against him. "A hickey is nothing compared to the way you clung to me yesterday."

That — that's not what Chuuya meant! Well, at least, not only that. It's about Dazai's family, too. Chuuya doesn't want Hayashi to ask more questions than necessary.

"I did not *cling*!"

"Oh?" Dazai shoots him an arched brow before descending on his jaw, peppering it with little bites and sucks that go straight to Chuuya's

groin. "Then we must have experienced two different nights."

Until now, he was confident that his memories were still intact, but that might not be the case, after all.

"It's the a-alcohol," Chuuya tries to mutter even though his voice betrays him, hitching with every open-mouthed kiss that Dazai presses to his skin. "'t makes me fucking needy."

"I guess it made up for the fact that you spent the first half of the night running away from me."

Chuuya's chest stutters. He's really bringing that up *now*?

"You were, *ah*, doing the same thing, asshole —"

"I wasn't avoiding you," Dazai murmurs and nibbles at the sensitive spot under his jaw that makes his toes curl every time. The bastard sure does know his way around by now! "I just wasn't chasing you."

How does he always manage to twist words in his favor?!

"Whatever," Chuuya hisses, straining against Dazai's hands to let him know that he gets it, teasing can be hot, but he would really like to get on with it now! "Same fucking thing."

With his arms, Dazai pushes away from Chuuya's face and cocks his head daringly. Chuuya squirms, immediately wishing he was back down here.

"Talk to me. What are you so afraid of?"

Chuuya's mouth parts. "What, like, right now?"

"Preferably within the hour," Dazai drawls, "so my friends won't destroy my brand new kitchen in our absence."

That makes him realize he doesn't have the slightest clue how late it is. Or how early. There's no clock in the room.

That's the least of Chuuya's concerns right now, though. The biggest one being this bitch in front of him, making him talk as some sick form of foreplay.

Chuuya considers his words, which isn't all too easy when he can feel the bulge of Dazai's cock, not entirely hard yet, but distracting enough if he rocks up his hips a bit. Chuuya's gaze wanders unconsciously and

ends up on the arms keeping him pinned to the bed. It's still fairly dark in the room thanks to the thick, dark-brown curtains saving them from the light, but he makes out the beginning of a dozen thin, white scars anyway.

"Eyes up here," Dazai tells him, squeezing his hands, and Chuuya has to blink his surprise away as his thoughts become even more tangled. Were those...?

"I, uh," he tries, "I know you said it was just a suggestion, but," he feels his eyes descend again and forces himself to look at Dazai instead, pushing everything else aside for later, "asking someone to move to the other side of the globe didn't feel very casual to me."

Dazai's face betrays nothing, but he nods as if to say Chuuya should go on. So he does. "I like you," he murmurs, genuine. "I like what we have right now. I don't want to ruin it by —" He shakes his head. "— making it into something more when it's already good enough as it is."

"This path has more than one exit," Dazai says, making him frown. "What if we don't ruin it? What if we make something already good into something fantastic?"

What if...

A what-if isn't worth all that fucking drama.

Chuuya stares back at him, jutting out his chin. "I don't need fantastic."

The thought is nice, sure, but... he doesn't want to spend the rest of his au pair year worrying about what will happen after or having awkward family dinners with the guy it didn't work out with. He just wants this. Nothing more.

"Okay."

If Dazai is disappointed by his answer, he doesn't show it.

"Okay?" Chuuya echoes, puzzled. "That's it? You have nothing more to say?"

"My turn in the truth game, huh?" *Truth what now?* "That's fair," Dazai murmurs and, to Chuuya's surprise, leans down to kiss his shoulder, slotting his knee between Chuuya's legs and giving him some much-needed friction. "I'm fine with it. We did agree on this to be something

casual, after all."

Exactly! Chuuya still doesn't understand why this turned out to be a question in the first place. Dazai doesn't exactly seem like the type to develop feelings after fucking someone a few times.

"And as I said..." Head thrown back, Chuuya hears Dazai speak above him, his hips rolling down on Dazai's knee over and over for pressure. "I'm a patient man. I can wait."

Wha...?

His confusion doesn't linger for long, Dazai dissolving his thoughts into white noise the moment he presses him further down into the mattress and kisses him. Chuuya's torn, pulsing need coiling in his belly as Dazai builds the intensity with each slide of lips until he lets out a wet gasp against him, and Dazai invades him, licks inside his mouth, lets his tongue drag against Chuuya's, and delights in the way Chuuya's whole world seems to reduce to this, to Dazai, every thought and worry he ever had vanished into irrelevant dust.

It's infuriating how good Dazai is at this, so unfair because all it takes is him to firmly press his entire weight against him as he undoes him with his mouth, and Chuuya's ready to do just about anything to get his cock inside him.

And that's how it goes.

Dazai takes his sweet, sweet time preparing Chuuya — too much time, but knowing that complaining and whining will make the bastard move even slower, Chuuya settles for quiet, whimpering moans and gasps, and the occasional insults that slip past his tongue.

By the time, Dazai finally slides his cock inside him, Chuuya's not sure whether to cry out of relief or scream at him to go faster, feeling like he's been on the edge of an orgasm for hours and still miles away from it at the same time.

Dazai fucks him with slow, deep thrusts and silences his noises with slick, mind-numbing kisses that pull Chuuya even deeper into his haze. When he comes the first time, he muffles his cry by biting Dazai's shoulder, drunk on the feeling and smell and sound of Dazai all around him. Because one is never enough, Chuuya digs his nails into his back and tells him to go faster, legs wrapping around his torso to change the angle, swimming in the bliss of his first orgasm and the mild discomfort of being oversensitive.

He's close again, so close when there's a loud laugh and hushed voices somewhere in the other room. Chuuya's brain is mush, but he manages to cringe. "Are we loud?" he whispers.

"We're fine," Dazai murmurs against his neck. He keeps his rhythm, but it's a bit slower, less frenzied, like the knowledge that there are still a bunch of people in the apartment pulled them both down to earth. "The walls here are thick."

Chuuya nods, but not even a moment later, there are muffled noises right outside the door. Footsteps, and then a whispered, "Should we knock?"

Jesus Christ.

Chuuya grabs Dazai's shoulders. "Did you lock the door?!" Physically, he's ready to push him off and hide under a blanket if worst comes to worst. Mentally, he would rather die than stop now.

Dazai looks way too amused by this shit. "Nope."

"Definitely," says another voice — it sounds like Tanizaki.

"You knock," replies the other one — Higuchi, maybe? "I'm scared."

Chuuya pinches Dazai's skin. "Do something!"

"They won't come in."

"And what if they do?!"

"I'm willing to take that risk."

"You —"

"I don't wanna go in," Tanizaki whispers. "We should just ask him like this."

"Okay, yeah. That's a good plan."

Chuuya lets out a little breath, thanking whatever God is up there, even if it means he has to endure Dazai's stupid smug expression.

There are three swift knocks on the door. Then, "D-dazai-san?"

Chuuya shouldn't be surprised by now, but he still has to muffle his moan when Dazai chooses that moment to mercilessly grind into his

prostate. "Yes?"

"Oh, good. You're alive. Is Chuuya-san okay?"

"Chuuya is perfect."

Chuuya wants to murder Dazai — but later, because right now, he's so close to coming again that it hurts.

"We were, uh, wondering how your stove works?"

"It doesn't," Dazai says calmly and grabs the back of Chuuya's thigh — how the fuck does he manage to stay calm when he's balls deep in Chuuya?!

"The electrician is only coming on Thursday. You're better off ordering in."

Chuuya's thankful for the hand that clamps over his mouth because when Dazai pushes his left thigh all the way against his chest, his cock slides deep, ruining him with every grind.

"Oh, okay."

Tanizaki still sounds nervous as shit, and if Chuuya wasn't so busy getting railed right now, he'd laugh. "Then thanks..." He trails off like he wants to say more, but eventually, finally, their footsteps retreat into the other direction.

Dazai's thrusts gain speed and fervor and Chuuya feels like his lungs are on fire, but then Dazai slides his hand from his mouth to his forehead, brushing away his sweaty bangs. Of all the things, that's what trips him over into his second orgasm, his muscles spasming wildly. Dazai finishes a few moments later, dropping his face on Chuuya's sweat-soaked shirt and allowing himself to breathe for a few moments. A quiet, muffled laugh escapes him. "That was..."

"Funny," Chuuya finishes, having to smile despite himself. "Very funny, Dazai."

Lifting his head a fraction, Dazai's eyes find him, and even though he stays silent, his expression speaks louder than any words. *You liked it.*

Yeah, Chuuya did, but he's not about to say that out loud. Thankfully, Dazai lets him get away with it.

For once, Dazai is the first one to move, slipping out of bed and

disappearing in the bathroom while Chuuya lazes around, grabbing his phone and avoiding the prospect of leaving this room. Sure, they weren't exactly caught in the act, and yes, most of their friends are probably well aware of what's going on between them, but that doesn't mean he's looking forward to greeting them and act like all of them aren't well aware he got his shit rocked a few moments ago. He has dignity.

Dazai isn't much help. After he does his part in getting them cleaned up, he drags him out of bed and pushes a pair of grey sweatpants into his chest since Chuuya has nothing to wear of his own — except yesterday's outfit, but he can't put that on. Not right. The pants look ridiculous on him, and combined with Dazai's oversized shirt, Chuuya feels like one of those rappers from 2000.

Chuuya tugs at the shirt, scowling deeply. "I feel stupid. "

"You look fine, "Dazai forces him to walk to the door, his hand on his hips. "A little like Eminem, but much prettier. A pretty Eminem, if you will. "

"Thanks, "Chuuya deadpans.

He might try to rap "*love the way you lie* "and "*mockingbird* "every time he's drunk and alone, but that does not mean he wants to look like the man!

Dazai doesn't care about that, though, instead leading them out of his room and into the kitchen where all the noise comes from. Not everyone stayed to sleepover last night, but there are still quite a few people here. Yosano, sitting on the counter. Kouyou, chopping tomatoes next to her. Ranpo talking to Tanizaki and Higuchi.

And they all turn to them when they come into view.

"Good morning. "

"Good afternoon," Ranpo says and raises his cup of coffee — an obscene amount of cream on top. "Do you want breakfast, or did you two already eat?"

When would they had the time to e — *oh.*

Chuuya rolls his eyes. Dazai touches his back before heading to his fridge. "Are you ordering?"

"Yup," Yosano chirps, not looking up as she taps away on her phone. "You want in?"

Chuuya feels his stomach growl in response. "Please. I'm starving."

Ranpo opens his mouth again, grinning, but Chuuya shoots him a scowl. "Don't even try to."

"You're no fun," Ranpo replies with a mock-pout. "What's the point of friendcest if we can't take the piss out of it?"

"Friendcest?"

"It's what we say when someone in our circle hooks up," Higuchi butts in, ever so helpful.

Everyone seems unfazed by the conversation, so Chuuya feels himself relax, both happy and a little surprised at how casually they're all handling it. "Does this happen often?" he can't help but ask. They're not *that* big of a friend group, right?

Ranpo takes a sip of the sugar-bomb in his hand. "I have slept with 71,4% of the people that were here last night. I'm still working on Oda."

Chuuya lets out a choked laugh, then glances at Higuchi and Tanizaki, who nod like that's common knowledge.

"What can I say?" Ranpo shrugs. "I'm a bit of a whore."

"Same," Chuuya says, and even though it shouldn't be surprising anymore, his chest still falls with relief when they chuckle quietly.

He finds that he really likes Dazai's friends. *His own friends*. Ranpo considers him part of the group as well.

It's not like Chuuya never had friends before. He always had someone to talk to during lunch at school. He got along well with the other dancers. But somewhere along the way, while he was wasting away in his bed after breaking his ankle, he realized most of these friendships were as shallow as a dirty puddle.

None of them were ever deep enough to have conversations like this.

Part of Chuuya is a little sad that of all places, he found his circle nine thousand kilometers away from home, but if it means one thing, then it's that he should just enjoy it as profoundly as he can.

The temporary relief of moving into his own place doesn't last long. Classes pick up a few days after New Year's Eve. When Dazai isn't on campus, he's in his father's office, working as his apprentice — the only position he could have been offered without offending the other employees that didn't get into the successful company because they were born into it. Dazai doesn't mind. He never wanted anything to do with it in the first place. Too bothersome. Too dull. But now that it pays for his bubble of freedom, he's willing to play nice and execute whatever tedious tasks land at his desk every day. The only useful thing this job accomplishes is making him look forward to spending his free hours with Chuuya even more. That's it.

Dazai's replying to a, frankly brainless, e-mail that got forwarded to him when the phone on his desk rings. It's the secretary's number, so Dazai picks up with a simple, "Yes?"

"Tsushima-san, Tsushima-sama has requested your presence in his office."

Dazai has told the guy repeatedly not to call him that, and the fact that he refuses to, whether it's because his simpleton's brain is too forgetful or because he fears it would insult the chairman, pisses Dazai off. Not a lot of things do.

"I will be there," he says, "and Tanaka-kun?"

"Yes, Ts—"

"Next time you call me Tsushima, I'll write your termination notice myself."

Despite carrying the assistant title around his neck, Dazai has only had to talk to his father one time — on his first day, so this vaguely feels like being ordered into the principal's office back in school. Maybe a tad worse.

The man seems to be already waiting for him, gesturing for him to sit down.

Dazai does.

Gen'emon pours two glasses of scotch before pushing one towards him. "Talk. Do I need to find another assistant?"

"The work is fine." It's easy, almost too easy for someone like him,

which is the problem.

"Do they respect you?"

Dazai suppresses a laugh. "No."

He's the prodigal son of the chairman. The seniors think he is a spoiled brat. The rookies most likely just hate his name. But respect? No.

"I wouldn't either," his father retorts and leans back in his chair, "but you will have to make them if you dream of ever sitting where I sit right now. Use your fucking brain for once in your life. You still have one, right?"

Dazai could probably go out of his way to show them that he's more than that. The problem is just that he doesn't plan to take over the seat. "I'm pretty sure it's still there, yes."

His father doesn't seem to appreciate the sarcasm as he shoots Dazai a dark look before turning to his screen, typing something. "I told the Nobukos you would accompany their daughter to the upcoming charity gala," he informs him. "Don't make me regret that decision."

"*I* didn't tell you I would take her."

"That's why I didn't ask for your input." Gen'emon's gaze slides over to him, heavy. "Or is that too big of an obligation for you? You can't handle being someone's date for two hours?"

Of course, it's not. Dazai spent the last eight years of his life dating someone for his family's sake. What are two hours compared to that?

But last time, it started like this, too. First, it's a charity event. Then they start talking about how cute their babies would look.

"One night," Dazai says. "That's it."

It makes his father chuckle. "Use that tone with someone else. Preferably, Nobuko-kun, so she won't leave you for someone else like Yosano did." He must catch Dazai's surprise because he puffs out a breath and takes a swig of his drink. "A friend of mine recently saw her hand in hand with someone. How bad of a boyfriend did you have to be for Yosano to immediately look for a replacement?"

"I told you. Our teenager romance hadn't been real for a long time before we broke up."

"And I'm telling you, one day when you'll have to raise an ungrateful brat yourself, you will understand that you act like a child. Who cares that you didn't love her anymore? Suck it up and do what you have to do like the rest of us." His father points a finger at his own chest. "Do you hear me complaining about working day and night just to have my son skip his classes and do drugs until he ends up in the hospital? No. Grow up and learn how to be a man, Dazai."

Technically, that is not true, because Dazai hears about the overdose incident every time he's forced to have this conversation, but for the sake of getting out here sooner rather than later, Dazai says, "Yes, father. I will grow up and learn how to be a man. Anything else?"

"No," he gruffs out. "Just don't do anything stupid with Nobuko. Her mother is —"

"— one of the company's lawyers," Dazai finishes for him as he pushes out of the chair. "I am aware, father."

He's heard it all before.

When the door falls shut, Dazai feels both relief and something acidic, sharp settle in his chest. Talking to his father does that.

Back at his desk, he's almost happy about the load of e-mails in his mailbox, making a game out of how passive-aggressively he can reply to someone without being actually rude. A good hour has passed when his phone buzzes in his pocket, and he fishes it out to see a text from Chuuya.

C: *tonight. you and me + a bottle of red wine*

C: *?*

And just like that, his chest feels light.

—

Chapter 11: There's Nothing In This World That a Good Blowjob Can't Fix

Chuuya isn't a fan of January. It's slow and heavy and cold and keeps everyone from the beautiful wonder that is spring. Last year, it was even worse. But right now? It feels all right.

Fingers wrapped around the barre, Chuuya inhales sharply. His eyes fall closed. He stretches out his right leg, pointing the toe — it stings, but surprisingly less than he anticipated — before dropping into plié. His leg moves backwards, flexing and —

The music turns off.

Kouyou walks out of the little side room frowning at her phone before she notices him standing. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know you —" Her brows furrow even more. "Should you be doing that?"

No, but who exactly is supposed to stop him here?

"It's just warm-up exercises," he says with a shrug, refusing to let go of the barre. A fucking stationary handrail shouldn't make him as happy as it does, but here he is, feeling his heart gallop wildly at the thought of doing even more.

Kouyou gives him one of her *whatever you say* looks before rubbing her forehead with a sigh. "Are you going to that charity thing?"

Bending his upper body down to his legs, Chuuya hums. "Yup. Hayashi's making me go. Are you?"

"Yosano asked me to come."

"And you don't want to because...?"

"Because there are going to be a bunch of bigoted pricks present," she snaps. "Those people made my transition into a gossip scandal, and now I'm supposed to shake their hands and act like I'm happy to be there?"

"You can say no." Chuuya pauses for a moment to offer her a sympathetic smile. "I'm sure Yosano will understand."

Kouyou scoffs. "I know that. I'm still going, though."

Chuuya laughs a little as he moves back up and stretches his right arm over his head towards the bar, delighting in the way his muscles burn. "We can get drunk and eat all their food."

"And have you jump Dazai in public? Especially when he's there with a date?"

Chuuya's arm falls. "He has a date?"

Kouyou's lashes flutter, and she opens her mouth as if she said something she shouldn't have. Probably because it's exactly what happened. "You didn't know?"

"No," he says. He didn't.

"Oh. I thought you did."

"It's all right." Chuuya looks into the mirror and rolls his shoulders, taking deep and even breaths. "It's not like we're together."

"Okay," he hears Kouyou say even though she doesn't exactly make it sound that way.

It is all right. Chuuya would be a hypocrite if he suddenly got angry over Dazai bringing a date to a charity gala after all the effort he went through to make sure they're both on the same page. As long as it's just a date for the night, Chuuya's fine. And as long as Dazai's not planning to fuck them.

Because that would *not* be all right.

Kouyou's phone buzzes, and she glances at it with a small sigh. "Come on, they're here."

Even though she specifically said it would not become a thing, Dazai and Yosano picking them up for lunch totally became a thing. Between his classes and the new job at his father's, Dazai doesn't have much time, and this one hour twice a week is one of the few times Chuuya spends with him outside of bed. He's still not sure where Yosano and Kouyou are standing — sometimes he'll catch them exchanging besotted grins, and other times they'll argue back and forth over something insignificant as the correct color of a fucking lamp — but most of the time, they're fun to be around, hence why Chuuya now even spends time at the ballet school even when Gin isn't here.

(And because on days like these, he gets a few minutes of tentative exercise in.)

Chuuya lets go of the barre and nods. "Let's go then."

He spends lunch debating which pictures to upload on Instagram, the girls helping him out from the other side of the table while Dazai's busy talking to one of his colleagues on the phone — someone incompetent judging by the irritation in his voice. Over the last three and a half months, the photos in Chuuya's camera roll have piled up, and it's been ages since he last posted anything on social media. His last post shows him first on stage in the middle of an *arabesque*, illuminated by dramatic lighting, the next one a picture of Chuuya relaxing with a bathrobe and a face mask afterwards. Simpler times.

But he's here now in a beautiful city surrounded by all these strange and wonderful people, so he might as well post them, show all his friends back at home that *hey, he's still alive and doing great, thank you very much, motherfuckers*. Or something like that.

In the end, Chuuya settles for five pictures. One of him walking down a street in china town, half-turned and grinning into the camera, another of him, Yosano and Ranpo that was taken at the club on Halloween, the New Year's Eve group picture, a snapshot of him eating ramen, and finally, a mirror selfie with Dazai — taken only a few days ago, both their hair in several ponytails that stick up like little palms while Chuuya's sipping on an iced coffee and trying not to smile. He just hopes that Dazai doesn't use his Instagram anymore because that one was not meant to see the light of day.

Dazai doesn't talk much in the car either as he drops off Kouyou and Yosano — both at the latter's place, mind you. His silence doesn't bother Chuuya. It's one of the things he has learned about him throughout the last months. Dazai might know how to use his words to get what he wants, which sometimes means that he talks a lot, but when they're only in each other's company, Dazai likes to be quiet, observe and listen rather than speak. It's fine. Most of the time, Chuuya has enough on his mind to fill the silence, and when he doesn't, he's able to enjoy the quiet moments, too.

By now, Chuuya knows a few of Dazai's tells, and today it's not just the silence. Today something is wrong. He keeps checking his phone. His fingers keep reaching for a spot under his bandages, scratching absently. And Chuuya even hears him mutter an insult under his breath when the car in front of them doesn't move as soon as the light

turns green.

It's probably just a bad day. Everyone has these, so Chuuya lets him be for a while, looking out of the window instead and trying to memorize as much of the city as possible.

A little more than eight months left.

It seems like a lot, but considering it feels like Chuuya just got here yesterday, he's certain the rest of the year will fly as well.

He's glad when they arrive in front of Dazai's building, not wanting to ruin his own mood as well. Dazai's quick in undressing, leaving his coat crumpled on the shoe cabinet. "I'm going to take a shower."

"Sure."

Chuuya makes sure to properly hang up the coat, knowing Dazai would be annoyed by the wrinkles later, before heading to the kitchen and helping himself to a glass of water. There isn't much else in the fridge, which makes Chuuya wonder what the hell or whether Dazai even eats when he's by himself. He doesn't like any of the answers that come to him.

In the other room, he hears the shower switch off.

Luckily for Dazai, Chuuya has a few ideas on how to get his mind off whatever is bothering him.

In the bedroom, Dazai's sitting on the edge of the bed that faces the wall on the other side, typing something into his phone. A roll of gaze is lying beside him.

Chuuya clears his throat before speaking as he lingers in the doorway. "Hi."

"I'll be right up," Dazai replies, though he doesn't turn around. "Give me a moment."

Chuuya shakes his head. It sounds like this thing, whatever the hell they're doing, is an obligation — which it isn't. He isn't so fucking needy that Dazai feels like he has to sleep with him, right?

So Chuuya climbs on the bed and crawls over to Dazai before carefully wrapping his arms around him, placing his chin on Dazai's bare shoulder. It's probably breaking a thousand rules that he set in his

own head, but Dazai helped him when he had trouble sleeping on New Year's, so the least he can do is try to help him in return. It's not like this is a love declaration anyway. Friends hug each other all the time, right?

"Are you okay?" Chuuya murmurs.

For a moment, he feels Dazai tense. Then his body slowly relaxes, pressing back into him. "Is that worry in Chuuya's voice?"

It would be easy to fall back into their usual bickering, let Dazai distract him with his teasing, but Chuuya stays strong. "Yeah, maybe. I just want to know if you're all right."

"Well, I am."

Chuuya squeezes him in admonishment. "You know, it's okay to admit that you're not, right?" he mutters. "You're human." And sometimes humans feel like shit.

Dazai turns his head a bit to look at him. "What's the point in that?"

"Talking about it can make it easier." Chuuya shrugs. "And if the person on the other end is as nice as me, they might offer to help you feel better."

"Feel better how?"

Chuuya offers him a toothy grin. "I could blow you."

"That is your idea of making it better?"

"Yeah, there's nothing in this world that a good blowjob can't fix."

Dazai might not be convinced, but at least, he looks amused as he grips Chuuya's chin, which proves the point. Sort of. "Or, you're just a little sex monster."

"So you don't want me to suck you off?"

"Do whatever you want, freckles. I'm —" Dazai's eyes fall closed, and he lets out a soft sigh. "— just tired."

If he says it like that, *again*, Chuuya's obviously not just going to do whatever he wants. It doesn't work like that. And this is supposed to be about Dazai, and making him feel better. Not Chuuya.

"Wait," he says and untangles from Dazai. "I might have just the right thing for that."

Dazai is silent when Chuuya practically runs off, looking for the jacket — and more specifically, the contents inside — that he left hanging in the corridor. He comes back with a little plastic bag of weed and all the other essentials, waggling them with a smirk. "What do you say?" he asks. "You, me, and a joint?"

Dazai narrows his eyes. "Where did you get that?"

"Tachihara."

Dazai's eyes narrow even more.

"Relax," Chuuya says with a huff. "I told you a thousand times we're just friends now."

"Like *we* are *just friends*?"

They are. In a way.

Climbing back on the bed, Chuuya leans closer and cups Dazai's cheek. "You're the only friend I want to do this with," he murmurs before brushing their lips together, copying the silly teasing thing Dazai always does, not yet a kiss, but the phantom touch of one, building tension until one of them snaps. (It's safe to say that Dazai somehow managed to completely change his kissing policies.)

But Dazai won't have it, grabbing Chuuya's jaw with perhaps a little more force than necessary before catching his lips and kissing him in a way that makes him gasp for breath.

It's over way too soon.

Dazai gives him a lazy smile before nodding towards the little bag. "Go on then."

Chuuya only listens to the idiot's orders because it was his own idea in the first place.

They relocate to the living room because he doesn't want to get any weed on the bed, so he sits down on the floor next to the table and gets to work. In hindsight, carrying it around with him might not have been the smartest idea, especially in Japan, but since he rarely ever uses public transport anyway, he figured the chances of getting

randomly controlled are pretty low. Chuuya prods Dazai for any experiences with drugs, and isn't surprised to hear that Dazai has a fair share of them. A rich kid like that? That's almost a given. Though Chuuya has no room to judge. *His* experiences were simply less fancy.

They order take out for later, Chuuya finishes rolling the joint, and finally, they go outside and settle down on the couch that's on Dazai's patio.

Chuuya lights the joint between his lips, takes a long drag, and then exhales slowly, blowing the smoke out as he leans back. The last few times he smoked with Tachihara, which was fun, but doing this with Dazai, especially after he had a bad day, feels more intimate than everything else they've done so far — and they've done a lot.

After taking two more drags, Chuuya wordlessly hands him the joint.

He can't help but watch Dazai as he lifts it to his mouth.

Dazai's beautiful. And not in the simple "*oh, he's pretty*" kind of way, but in a more sharp, cutting sort of one. His cheekbones are high and pronounced. His hair is perfectly messy, with a hint of curls at the edges. His lashes are stupidly long, and —

Dazai's beautiful.

And sometimes Chuuya forgets, so used to being with him that it becomes normal, but then in moments like this, he looks at him and gets hit with the truth all over again.

So fucking beautiful.

"You're staring," Dazai suddenly says and nudges Chuuya's hand with his.

Chuuya takes back the joint and shrugs. "Just admiring how handsome you are."

"Huh?"

"Don't make me repeat it," he grumbles before taking a drag and deliberately staring at the skyline in front of them instead.

Thankfully, Dazai doesn't, but his thigh presses against Chuuya's, which feels nice. Slowly, everything's starting to feel nice. Despite having smoked hundreds of times, to this day, Chuuya still can't

pinpoint the exact feeling of being high. He just knows that he feels... heavy, like gravity is pressing him deeper into his seat.

Chuuya shifts a little, content when their arms are pressed together as well. He likes the feeling of Dazai. Solid. Grounding. Good.

He's not sure what possesses him to say, "Did you know that I tried weed for the first time with my ex-boyfriend?"

Dazai glances at him. "I didn't."

"Well, I did. I'm pretty sure I didn't even feel anything, but I pretended to be high just to..." He shakes his head and huffs out a dry laugh. "...convince him that I wasn't an inexperienced loser."

"I'm starting to get a picture of your ex, and it's not very good."

Chuuya hums. "He was an ass."

"Is that why you broke up?"

"That," Chuuya says, "and because he cheated on me."

For once, he stares back at Dazai and hopes that he puts two and two together, hopes that Dazai realizes even if Chuuya wanted something serious, he *couldn't*.

Dazai does understand, that's clear from the light in his eyes, but his reaction should be different. He shouldn't look so... pleased.

Chuuya scowls.

"I'm sorry," Dazai lies and places his big, stupid hand on his thigh, sliding it down to squeeze his knee. "You deserve the whole world and nothing less."

Unfair, Chuuya thinks, not even hearing the words when all he can feel is Dazai's fingers kneading his flesh. "Yeah," he mumbles, "so true."

Dazai gently pries the joint out of his hands, but then his other hand cups the back of his head, and oh, Chuuya knows exactly where this is going. Intoxicated, he watches Dazai take a drag before leaning into him, connecting their lips. Chuuya opens up, allowing the smoke to rush into his lungs. As it tears through him, his hands curl in the shirt Dazai threw on before they went outside. Dazai kisses him, tongue slipping into his mouth, and Chuuya's head spins with all the sensations that pump through his blood while they share this one

breath.

When they break apart, at last, Chuuya breathes out the smoke, though he immediately tries to kiss Dazai again, which makes Dazai laugh against his mouth, and hearing that sound, so genuine despite everything, makes his heart soar.

"Easy," Dazai murmurs, but he helps him get onto his lap, sliding one hand under Chuuya's sweater and softly stroking his back as Chuuya straddles his waist. Dazai's other hand holds up the joint in silent offering.

Chuuya only takes a small drag before puffing it out, lashes fluttering. "I'm done."

God knows why, but Dazai is incredibly tolerant when it comes to all sorts of substances, so he finishes the joint by himself, which is annoying when all Chuuya wants to do is make out with him for the next five hours, though he silently endures it by playing with the collar of his shirt.

When Dazai finally stubs out the stupid thing, Chuuya almost cries from happiness as he slides his arms around Dazai's neck and crushes their lips together. Chuuya has kissed people before when he was high, but never like this — every little breath, every shiver, and slick slide of lips heightened until it feels like he's drowning in Dazai.

He lets out a startled gasp when Dazai's hands travel lower to cup the back of his thighs, and then he gets up, carrying Chuuya.

"Please don't fall," he whispers into Dazai's cheek, clinging tighter to him.

"I don't intend t—" Dazai wobbles a little as he enters his penthouse, but after a second, he steadies himself. "Heh, just kidding."

Chuuya bites his face for that.

Dazai surprisingly places him on the floor instead of the couch in the living room, but that's fine with him. Chuuya would be happy with just about anything right now.

Though he can't resist arching his brow and smirking mockingly as his hands tighten around Dazai's neck. "Are you going to fuck me on the floor?"

"Remember how I told you we'd use every single piece of furniture in this apartment?" Dazai asks as he stares down at him. "I keep my words."

"I'm not sure floor qualifies as furnit—" Chuuya's words dissolve as Dazai crushes their lips together, pressing his chest against him and basically pinning him to the floor. Dazai likes to do that, he noticed, making Chuuya play by his rules, breaking Chuuya apart with mindless teasing until he can't even think straight anymore, dominating, which Chuuya doesn't mind, not when he always ends up blissed out by the end of it, it's just... different. New.

Usually, it's Chuuya who calls the shots, simply because it's easier to get off that way. After all, no one knows his body better than he does. But it's hard to deny that this, letting Dazai take over while Chuuya just gets to shut off his brain and enjoy is actually kind of nice. He could get used to it — maybe.

Chuuya's brain melts into liquid because of Dazai's slow and deep kisses, because of the way he grabs Chuuya's thigh and fits himself between his legs, rubbing their clothed erections together, and probably because of the joint.

But it's just so good.

Chuuya doesn't think he can ever get enough of this. He could just go on and on and on and —

Whimpering breathlessly, he slides his hands into Dazai's hair, pulling at the roots until Dazai has no choice but to pull away from him, not looking very pleased as he does so.

"I still want to suck you off," Chuuya tells him with heaving lungs.

"Greedy," Dazai mutters, but he sits up above him, "but if you want it that badly."

"You know," Chuuya slips his fingers under his shirt and then fingers the waistband of his briefs, "you should be more careful with how you treat the guy that's about to have your dick in his mouth."

"Are you threatening to bite my cock off?"

"I just might," Chuuya snaps as he tugs off the only thing that separates him from what he wants, his heart thundering in his ears.

"Dying by your hand doesn't seem that bad."

Except that Chuuya doesn't want him to die. He wants to make Dazai feel good. So after the briefs are off, discarded somewhere on the floor, Chuuya cups the back of his thigh and leaves a trail of kisses on his pale skin, inches shy of his cock. Above him, Dazai's still. Even when Chuuya's lips travel higher, dragging against his shaft, his lashes fluttering as he stares up, holding Dazai's gaze. Even then, his control never slips. Part of Chuuya hates it. Another part sees it as a challenge.

He's good at giving head, he likes doing it just as much as he likes Dazai's cock, so it should be easy, really, except that Dazai's stubborn, but luckily for him, Chuuya is too.

His hand wraps around Dazai's cock, thumb smearing the precum welling from the tip down his length before licking a wet trail to meet his fingers. Chuuya wants to drag it out, make Dazai suffer a little, but patience hasn't ever been his strong strut. His cock, thick and warm, is right there. Chuuya wraps his lips around the head and sighs happily.

It's not a gasp or a moan, but Dazai's next breath is a little more strained. A moment later, he pets Chuuya's head, long fingers driving through his hair and tucking it behind his ear as Chuuya just sucks at the head, for now, rubbing his tongue against the frenulum over and over, eyelids heavy with the heady desire that throbs through his system.

"You like this," he hears Dazai murmur, "don't you?"

Chuuya exhales a wet breath and pulls away only to say, "So what if I do?" He doesn't wait for a reply before pressing his mouth back against Dazai's cock. It stretches open, and his length slides into Chuuya's mouth, deeper than before, delaying whatever stupid comment Dazai was about to say by a hissed-out groan, fingers tightening ever so slightly in his hair.

Chuuya does like this a lot, getting to hear every reaction and breath from up close, feeling his muscles tense, his cock twitch in his mouth. He likes the stretch of his jaw and how it feels sore and tired afterwards, like after a good workout. It just makes Chuuya feel good. Like he's doing something right for once in his life.

Not that he's going to tell Dazai all that. He's already smug enough as it is.

"If I let you, you'd probably do it day and night, huh?" Dazai continues.

With his mouth wide open, sliding up and down the length of Dazai's cock, a guttural moan rips out of Chuuya. *Yes*.

Dazai's fingers scratch at his scalp, and his thumb brushes his ear shell, playing with it. "Just sit on your knees and suck cock all day." Chuuya doesn't exactly nod, but he bobs his head eagerly, which might as well be a nod. It's not his fault that the idea, the prospect of doing nothing but this makes dizzying, nearly painful heat stir in his belly, his hips unconsciously rocking even though they meet nothing but air.

"Like you were made just for me." Breathing heavily, Chuuya pulls back only to yawn open his throat and let his cock slide down the deepest yet, blinking up at Dazai when the tip hits the back of his mouth, swallowing. The sound he rips out of Dazai is beautiful, raw, and low.

The whole moment feels unreal, suspended in time. Everything feels so hazy. Chuuya pulls off, allowing himself a moment to breathe, enjoying the feeling of Dazai massaging his scalp. Then Chuuya shifts, bracing one arm against the floor before squeezing Dazai's cock and opening his mouth again. By now, Chuuya has enough experience and skill to be confident in his deepthroating abilities, so when Dazai's fingers move to cup his face as his cock slides home, Chuuya closes his eyes, letting him.

As he fucks Chuuya’s mouth, slow but deep, Dazai starts speaking again, something about his lips and how they are criminal, but right now, Chuuya's too far gone in his head to hear.

He feels nice and warm, and —

He really has to fucking *sneeze*.

For a moment, the whole fucking world stills as Chuuya fights his own reflexes, truly terrified that he's about to actually bite off a fucking dick, his hand pushing Dazai's thigh away with an urgent whimper. Chuuya's almost ready for the worst to come when Dazai's cock slides out of him, *thank Jesus*, and his mouth still half-open, his hand a few milliseconds too late, the sneeze rips out of him. *Loud*. And *gross*.

For a few seconds, everything, even their breathing, is utterly silent. Then above him, Dazai makes a low sound in the back of his throat —

And Chuuya looks up horrified, but instead of disgust or perhaps annoyance, he realizes it's a sound of laughter, and seconds later, he feels it bubble in his throat as well.

Uncontrollable and feverish laughter.

Chuuya's not sure whether the tears in his eyes come from his pitiful attempt at trying to hold it in or from his wheezing right now, but it honestly doesn't matter.

"Stop laughing," he hears Dazai gasp out somewhere above, though his voice cracks with a snort as well. "You were about to — about to —"

"You started it!" Chuuya exclaims and presses a hand against his mouth when the fucking giggles threaten to burst out again. Shaking his head, he says, "I'm sorr- sorry, I'll just —" He squeezes Dazai's thigh. He tries to tug him closer again, opening his mouth but he just ends up laughing again, pressing his forehead against Dazai's leg as his chest shakes silently.

Dazai cards his fingers through his hair. "You are not going anywhere near my dick like this." When Chuuya doesn't stop, he forces him to look up, and the grumpy frown on Dazai's face doesn't really help with his current situation. "Will you stop now?"

"'m sorry," Chuuya wipes a stray tear from his eye, "I think I'm really high."

"Color me surprised." Dazai kneels down, tugging at his shirt until Chuuya obediently lifts his arms and lets him tug it off, throwing it over his shoulder.

"Aren't you?" Chuuya wants to know as Dazai works on his pant next.

"A little," is the murmured answer.

"Doesn't it ever get tiring to have such a high tolerance? Your mind working around the clock?"

Dazai only looks at him when Chuuya's fully naked, squirming because it's cold on the floor, even if there is a perfectly comfortable carpet under him. Dazai's mouth lifts into a half-smile. "You have no idea."

"One day, I'll get you really drunk," Chuuya slides his arms under his shirt and around his back when Dazai's lips descend on his neck, "and

then — uh, then I'll —"

"Then what?"

"Then I'll take care of you while you experience the g-glorious feeling of being empty-headed —"

Dazai's hand has been steadily wandering down his thigh, but when it reaches his ass, it suddenly stills, and he lets his head drop on Chuuya's chest, groaning loudly.

"What?!"

"The lube," Dazai whispers. "I forgot the lube."

Jesus, such dramatics.

"It's literally in the next fucking room," Chuuya grumbles and tries to push Dazai up with a hand against his chest to make him move his damn legs.

Dazai shakes his head, hair tickling his neck. "That's so far away."

"You know what else is far away? My orgasm, Dazai. That's far away if you don't get up and just get the damn lube."

Dazai shoots him a mean look. "Says the guy who sneezed on my cock."

"And I'll do it again," Chuuya snaps, now fully pressing Dazai away from him, which is harder than it sounds like. "Come on," he whines, "I want to get off while I'm still high."

"So much about making me feel better," Dazai says before he finally gets up and disappears down the hallway.

Ha.

Well, Chuuya's not flawless.

For whatever reason, the bastard takes ages in his bedroom — probably out of spite — so Chuuya stretches to fish his phone out of his pants. He has enough time to reply to his texts and pick out a playlist that he lets run on the wonderful surround system here before Dazai returns, carrying lube and something else.

"*The arctic monkeys*?" Dazai asks. "Really?"

Chuuya scowls. "Why not?"

"It's cliche."

"Well, excuse me, but I don't want to have sex listening to *Cardi B*, and — is that a blindfold?"

Dazai holds it up with a dangerous smile. Black and discreet. "It is." When he sees Chuuya's frown deepen, Dazai's smugness pales a little, and he spreads his fingers across his thigh, rubbing his skin soothingly. "We don't have to. It can make the experience more... sensual, though. I assumed you would like that."

And that makes Chuuya's stomach's twist with guilt, and curiosity, and something else entirely. Just... a bunch of emotions that Chuuya can't even begin to make sense of right now. "I would, I think," he says, tugging Dazai closer because seriously, it's getting cold down here. "I just didn't expect it, 's all. It's... new."

"You've never tried before?"

You can't exactly bring a blindfold to a midnight hook up with some random person you met through an online dating app or to someone from a shabby club. And the sex with his ex never went beyond the *normal* stuff.

"No."

"Do you want to?"

The idea is as intriguing as it is intimidating, but looking at Dazai above him, Chuuya realizes he trusts him. A lot. He's not a random hook-up. He's... Dazai.

"I guess," Chuuya says with a shrug.

"That's not a yes."

"It's not a no either."

Dazai sighs like Chuuya is the one being unreasonable, but he does grab the blindfold and lets Chuuya take a scrutinizing look before he gently slips it around his face. The dim lighting of the living room disappears, plunging Chuuya into darkness. Obviously.

"And?" he hears Dazai ask.

"Well, I can't see shit," Chuuya deadpans.

The laugh above him is soft. "Yes, Chuuya, that is the point."

"Just do your thing." Chuuya finds the familiar outline of Dazai's arms and relaxes a little when he feels lips press against his collarbone. "And talk to me."

Dazai's voice is grounding in the darkness.

So Dazai talks. His topics range from everyday conversations like the morning lecture that he hates to telling Chuuya how beautiful he looks as he takes his fingers. They've done this so many times now that Dazai knows exactly where to push and how much pressure to apply to make Chuuya unravel so that he soon has Chuuya panting around four fingers, clinging to Dazai's neck as he listens to the words whispered into his skin.

Dazai wasn't lying about the blindfold intensifying everything. Not only that, but it makes the whole experience more intimate and raw. When Dazai finally pushes his cock inside, pressing Chuuya's legs against his stomach so that they're basically over Dazai's shoulders, it feels like he's drowning in the staggering sound of their heartbeats, sobbing breaths, and the slick sound of skin meeting skin.

It's overwhelming in the best way possible.

They fuck, nice and slow, and Chuuya wonders how he's ever supposed to touch another person again when his body is so used to Dazai that the mere idea of someone else feels like coming off the best drug he's ever had.

Later, after Chuuya wakes up from his five-minute power nap, they lie around on the floor, wrapped up in a blanket. He stills feels sleepy, and not for the first time, he wishes he could just stay and spend the night instead of going home to his au pair duties.

It's brattish, yes, considering he is, in fact, here because he has a job. It's not like he can just spend an entire year doing nothing except having fun and fucking his host brother. Still, the Tsushimas have been so generous so far that he sometimes forgets that.

Getting up and putting on clothes sounds worse than taking a plunge into the arctic ocean right now, so Chuuya presses his face into his hands and ignores that he will have to exactly that within the hour. Instead, he thinks about when he'll see Dazai next and repeat this.

With the blindfold. Maybe even with more *tools*.

And that reminds him.

"The charity thing," Chuuya says, glancing at Dazai, who's just been running his fingers up and down the length of his arm for the last few minutes. "Who is your date?"

If Dazai's surprised that Chuuya knows, he doesn't show it. "Nobuko Sasaki," he replies and then smiles. "Why, you jealous?"

Chuuya huffs as he rests his chin on his hands. "No. I just heard that you're going with someone. Did your father come up with the idea?"

Dazai lets out a breath. "Yes."

"You're don't have to date her, though, right? This isn't going to be another Yosano thing?"

"No. It’s not going to be like that."

And that's all he needed to hear. Everything else doesn't matter.

"Then I hope she's cool."

"Yeah, me too.“

Chapter 12: That One Smile Is Enough

Chapter Notes

> hey ho, it's been a while! this chapter is pretty short but all i managed to squeeze out right now <3 with my summer break approaching, i'll be able to update more often though!

If Dazai was prepared to treat the *date* with Nobuko as a one-time favor for everyone involved, then she's the complete opposite, digging her perfectly manicured claws into him the moment she spots him.

The last time they saw each other, Nobuko was quiet and reserved, complimenting Yosano's skirt with flushed cheeks. Since then, she seems to have grown balls the size of Jupiter, which is why, as she links arms with him, Dazai feels bulldozed for a few seconds before he catches himself and plasters his obligatory feline smile on his face.

"— should come with me to the luncheon next week. I'm sure they would love you."

"Nobuko-chan," Dazai says as they stroll past vaguely familiar groups of people, nodding politely now and then, "I just got out of a relationship, and I'm not planning to immediately jump into a new one."

She snorts dryly. "Please, do you take me for an idiot? I know that you and Yosano-san were just faking it."

Huh.

"Do you now?"

"Let's just say one of my friends had a lot to say about you after a weekend out of town," she tells him with a coy shrug before snatching a glass of champagne from one of the waiters. "Either you were cheating or pretending, but Yosano-san would never be stupid enough to be with a guy that cheats."

Dazai tried to pick people that were miles out of his family's circle whenever he spent the night with someone other than Yosano, but this just goes to show that you can never be careful enough.

"If you know that we didn't actually date," he says, "then you should also realize that we stopped the charade for a reason."

Nobuko's smirk bleeds into a frown. "Don't tell me it's because you fell in love."

"That..." Dazai unconsciously scans the grand ballroom until his gaze lands on a tiny redhead in the distance, sitting at his family's table and fiddling with Ryuu's collar. "... is not relevant." Tearing his eyes away, he levels a cold smile at Nobuko. "I'm too old to be playing pretend. "

"Just a few outings together," she says like she didn't even hear him. "It's not a big deal. "

"Your family is that bad? "

"This isn't just about them. It's about me. See, I want to go places, and that is ten times easier with the heir of an empire by my side."

"Your mother is a lawyer for that company," Dazai points out. "You don't exactly have to climb the social ladder."

"But you're Dazai Osamu. You and your friends are like —" She waves her hand. "— these untouchable legends around town. I want in on that."

"Then we'd have to like you, which we don't."

Nobuko rolls her eyes, taking a sip from her champagne. "I don't want to be liked. I just want everything that comes with it. Do I need to remind you that the relationship between our families is crucial? From what I heard, your father isn't pleased about your break up with Yosano. I bet he would be even less happy if he heard how you treated the daughter of his company's lawyer."

Dazai can't help but laugh. She's actually trying to bribe him.

"What do you want to do? Run to your mommy and tell her that I tugged on your ponytail?"

"I can be very creative," she says and lifts her glass in salute. "Cheers."

Dazai can handle whatever his father throws at him, but he's been trying to build a tentative ceasefire, mostly to spare himself of unnecessary damage and to keep the small bubble of freedom that he got with his apartment. Clearly, he didn't try hard enough because there is a girl with a goal, and she's willing to let all of it crumble to get what she wants.

Of course, he has options.

For the first time in a while, Dazai actually has something at stake, though, something he doesn't want to lose — and isn't that funny? He wants. For the most part of his life, he wasn't sure he was even able to want anything.

It's a realization to muse over later.

"You can think about it," Nobuko says cheerily. "Just consider if a few hours of your week mean that much to you. I'll go say hi to a few of my mother's colleagues in the meantime."

A young waiter offers him a glass of champagne. Dazai downs it.

Once that's done, he takes a look around the room, trying to find someone or something. Preferably, Akiko. Or, Chuuya. But the ballroom is swarming with people now, the buffets declared open, and the table that was occupied by Chuuya just a moment ago is currently empty.

So Dazai heads to the bar instead.

He wastes some time there, staring at the bottom of his glass as facts and probabilities run through his mind, only realizing how much time has passed when a hand lands on the back of his neck.

"What are you doing?" he hears his father ask.

"Having a drink." The grip on Dazai isn't violent or painful, but it's firm enough to drag him away from the bar. If anything, it's just dehumanizing. He got so used to being touched gently that Dazai finds himself suddenly thankful for the bandages between him and his father.

Ironic, really, considering why he started wearing them in the first place.

"I thought we discussed that you're here today with Nobuko." His father doesn't look at him as he leads him through the crowd of people. "Or was something about that unclear?"

"Relax, old man. She wanted to say hello to a family friend, and I used that time to grab a drink. Or does accompanying someone to a charity gala mean that you're not allowed to separate for more than five minutes? Must be a new rule that I missed."

Dazai almost runs into the man when his father stops. His voice when he speaks is calm. "I asked you, for *one* thing, Dazai. One single thing. What was it?"

"Not to embarrass you."

"And what did you do?"

"I didn't embarrass you."

"Then why is Nobuko strolling through the ballroom alone? Why is her mother asking me why her daughter's date is getting trashed at the fucking bar instead of being with her? Why can every parent in this room say something good about their kid except me because my son is always off doing god knows what? Don't you think that's embarrassing for me?"

If you put it like *that*.

Dazai shoves his hands into the pockets of his suit, but he can't quite come up with the perfect quip to reply to this argument. His brain fails him.

"So, can you just do what I fucking tell you for once?"

"Probably."

"I'll introduce you to some important people. Only talk if it's necessary, or else you'll scare them away as well."

That sounds doable, right? Right.

Most of the people at the table are old men with balding hair. Nobuko and her parents are there as well, the seat next to her obviously reserved for him. His father sits down next to Hayashi, and as Dazai's gaze wanders further, it meets Chuuya's, who smiles sadly as if to say, *I'm sorry you have to talk to boring business moguls* and Dazai smiles back as if to *say I'm sorry I can't talk to* you.

It's enough.

That one smile is enough.

As Chuuya watches the girl, Nobuko, grin up at Dazai and laugh loudly at his joke for the tenth time in less than twenty minutes — seriously, he isn't even that funny -- the only thing that keeps him

from snapping like a territorial dog is a smile.

It was small and fleeting but probably the most genuine expression on Dazai's face tonight. And it was directed at Chuuya — not Nobuko.

Somewhere in the back of his head, he's aware of how childish he is. After all, casual fuck buddies mean casual fuck buddies. Chuuya has no right to be annoyed that Dazai's pretend date seems to be just as besotted with him as — as everyone else. It's just not that easy to watch Dazai, who spends his nights with Chuuya, be with someone else in front of everyone. Casual or not.

It makes Chuuya feel small. Like some unimportant side piece.

And it's one of the many reasons why the two of them would never work out in an actual relationship. This is and will always be Dazai's world, and as easy as it is to pretend otherwise, Chuuya isn't part of it.

A piece of popcorn hits him in the forehead, making him turn and scowl at the culprit across from him.

Ranpo.

"Stop the—" Chuuya starts, but before he can even finish the sentence, he gets hit with another one. This time it's Gin. "Don't follow Ranpo's example!" he snaps. "He's an awful role model."

Ranpo ignores him in favor of giving Gin a small high five. "Good job, kiddo."

Gin smiles brightly, though it turns more sheepish when she sees Chuuya's glare.

"At least, just throw it at me. Not your family, okay? They're having very important adult conversations."

"I'll give you one thousand yen if you hit Dazai," Ranpo immediately says.

"You don't need one thousand yen, Gin," Ryuu butts in quietly. "Don't listen to him."

Chuuya smiles. "Exactly."

"How boring," Ranpo sighs.

"What are you doing here anyway?" Chuuya asks. "Shouldn't you be

talking business as well?"

"I have an assistant who does that for me. I thought that maybe you could make this evening entertaining, but all you're doing is staring at Dazai."

"I am not —! And keep your voice down!"

Ranpo smirks into his hand. "Ah, right. No one is supposed to know. For how long do you think you will be able to keep up this charade?"

"For as long as possible," Chuuya mutters as he stares at his empty plate.

Gin tugs at Ranpo's sleeve. "Why is Chuuya staring at big brother?"

"Yeah, Chuuya," Ranpo drawls. "Why are you?"

Chuuya makes a face. He really should be more careful in front of the kids. "Because he, uh, has funny hair."

Gin's eyes go wide. "It sticks up in all directions!"

"It does!"

At that moment, Oda comes back with his third plate of food, but instead of digging in himself, he slides it towards the middle. "I can see all of you eyeing my curry," he explains.

"What if I was eyeing you?" Ranpo asks.

"Then I'd tell you to visit an eye specialist."

"But I like what I see."

Chuuya takes a generous scoop of the curry and glances at Oda, curious to see how this will play out. (It's nice to see other people being oblivious for a change.)

"It is very delicious," Oda agrees.

"I wasn't talking about the curry."

It takes Oda a few seconds to reply, but the smile that stretches on his face is amused. "You never really stop, do you?"

"Not until I receive a better explanation than the ones you gave me."

Chuuya's a bit lost, but he gets distracted by the fact that Dazai gets up from the table, excusing himself to go to the bathroom. Chuuya's first thought is to stand up as well and — he's not even sure what it is that he wants to do. Have a quickie somewhere? Sure.

But it's more than that. Dazai will never say it out loud, but he's always a little on edge whenever his father is around. Chuuya never got to the bottom of what the hell happened to Dazai's face that one time — and knowing him, Chuuya probably never will, but their relationship is clearly strained, and Dazai working for him doesn't seem to help much. So right now, Chuuya just wants to be there for him. He wants to be a friend — and if that involves risky bathroom sex, he won't mind either.

But getting up right after Dazai would be awfully suspicious.

So Chuuya forces himself to stay put, settling for opening their texts instead. He's just about to write something along the lines of "do you want to go out for a quick smoke later" when, out of the corner of his eyes, he sees Nobuko get up as well and excuse herself.

And all his preservation instincts fly out of the window. Fuck being careful.

"Oi," he cuts into whatever the fuck Ranpo and Oda are currently discussing animatedly, "can you look after the kids for... a few minutes? I need to use the restroom."

Ranpo smirks knowingly. "Sure, Chuuya-kun. Just try not to traumatize anyone in there."

Chuuya bites the curse on his tongue, and he simply nods. As he gets up, he hears Ranpo says, "We are a good team, right, Oda?"

He does ship them a little.

As he weaves his way through the crowd, Chuuya forces himself to walk slower than he actually wants to, his heart thundering in his ears. It's beyond ridiculous. Maybe Nobuko actually needs to go to the bathroom. Perhaps she needs to take a phone call that her family isn't supposed to overhear. Maybe —

Maybe Nobuko is glowering furiously at whatever Dazai is telling her before spinning around and stomping away.

Great. Now he feels terrible. Did he just witness Dazai blowing her

off? Or...

Dazai scrubs a hand across his face, looking tired, but when his eyes fall on Chuuya, he seems to relax.

"Hi," Chuuya says when they're within speaking distance. "Are you okay?"

"I'm bored out of my mind," Dazai places a hand on his back as they set a gradual pace, destination unknown, "but other than that, perfect."

Huh.

Chuuya glances up at him from the side. "How's your date going then?"

"Nobuko and I had very different expectations for tonight."

"She likes you?"

"Not me. Something else," Dazai says. "Don't worry about it. I took care of it."

Chuuya's not sure what that means, but Dazai's steps become faster and faster, and — "Where are you taking us?"

"Somewhere private. With a door."

Chuuya can't help but smile as he does his best at keeping up. Their destination sounds good. Then again, he'd just about follow Dazai anywhere.

When Dazai comes back from the bathroom, he can't help but give Nobuko one of his less polite smiles, the ones that cut.

It didn't take him long to figure out the name of the friend she mentioned earlier, even less to call said friend and talk her into giving him some... exciting information about Nobuko, like the fact that she regularly does coke with her dear university friends. Something her mother would love to hear, he's sure. And just like that, her threats hold even less danger than a tiny chihuahua barking its mouth raw.

Dazai might be scared of dogs, but even he can recognize that those tiny creatures are ultimately harmless.

And so is Nobuko.

The cold glare she offers him upon his return promises there will be more to come, but she isn't the only one who is creative.

Dazai will handle it.

Chapter 13: Much Too Much

Chapter Notes

TW:
- a scene with self-harm (hitting oneself) towards the middle of the chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chuuya has always found February to be the slowest out of all the winter months, even though it has the fewest days. The holidays are over, but spring still seems too far away. It just drags.

This year, however, he feels like it gallops.

Maybe because this time, he doesn't have to cram for exams that he always marked down as unnecessary anyway, and neither does he have to follow a rigorous training and diet schedule. He just... enjoys his time.

Most of the time, taking care of Ryuu and Gin doesn't even feel like working. They can be a handful, sure, especially when they have their five minutes where losing a sock means the end of the world, but they're also quite intelligent for their age, so Chuuya definitely got lucky.

He spends his free hours with friends. Kouyou. Tachihara. And, of course, Dazai.

His work and class schedule allow less and less space for the two of them, but they somehow make it work. It means Chuuya gets only a few hours of sleep at night because staying is never an option, and mornings at the Tsushimas start at the ripe hour of six, but Chuuya does what needs to be done and simply forces himself to wake up nonetheless—even if it feels like physical torture.

On Japan's national foundation day, he finds himself sprawled over Dazai's couch when his phone buzzes with an incoming call from his dad. His fingers hastily drive through his hair — a futile attempt to make sure he doesn't look like he was railed less than five minutes ago — before Chuuya accepts the call with a wide grin.

"Hey, dad. "

On the screen, he can only see Paul sitting at their table in the kitchen. Usually, it's always the two of them calling, but Arthur is probably just sleeping in. (Chuuya totally takes after him when it comes to that.)

"Hey, kiddo." Paul waves into the camera, the image a bit distorted. "How have you been doing?"

"I'm great. I finally went to *cosmo world* yesterday after, like, four months."

"Did you ride on the Ferris wheel?"

"Yup. A little tedious if you ask me, but it sure looked pretty."

"Did you go with Dazai?"

Not this again.

"No," Chuuya says. "I went with Kouyou."

Ever since he sent those New Year's Eve pictures, his dads have been annoying him about Dazai — that, and probably the fact that Dazai is present during every second call, but Chuuya chooses to ignore that.

"Who is Kouyou again?"

"The dancing instructor."

There's a brief pause. "You're not dancing again, are you?"

Chuuya's jaw clenches. "No, dad. I'm not."

"The doctors said you —"

"I know what the doctors said. I was there."

"I'm just making sure. Your health is more important than ballet, Chuuya."

He just nods. "Anyways, is dad still sleeping? Because I have something he'd love to see."

"About that... "Paul grimaces, and that alone sends Chuuya's heart racing. "Something happened."

"What?"

"He's in the hospital right now — it was just a cold, but it got a bit worse over the last few days. You know how easily he gets sick. So don't worry, okay?"

"Dad is in the hospital," Chuuya snaps, getting up from the couch to pace through the room. "Of course, I'm going to be worried! When did he — why didn't you tell me sooner?!"

"Because I wanted to avoid this."

"Is it bad?"

"The doctors said it's pneumonia. But I just got back from the hospital, and he was fine. Tired, but fine."

Chuuya nods, his chest rising and falling with each heavy breath. "Good. That's good."

"They'll probably release him in a few days, so I don't want you losing any sleep over this, okay?"

That's so much easier said than done. Fuck. Chuuya hates being — here, thousands of miles away, utterly helpless to do anything but wait.

"If it gets worse —" He starts. Then he'll take the first flight home. Consequences be damned.

"It won't," his father says. Chuuya wants to say, you can't know that, but the words are glued to his tongue. He can't think about that, let alone utter it.

"Okay," he murmurs and scrubs a hand across his face. "Do you think I can call him?"

"He's probably sleeping right now. We can call him later. Together?"

"Yeah, okay."

"I'll keep you updated."

"Please," Chuuya all but begs. "It's bad enough that I'm on another continent. Don't keep things from me, dad. I can't —"

"I know, Chuuya." His voice is always so fucking calm. It used to piss Chuuya off. In fights, he'd be screaming his lungs out, but Paul would never even do as much as raise his voice. Right now, though, he's

grateful to hear that quiet confidence. It's reassuring. "I promise."

Chuuya blows out a dry breath. "Thanks."

"Tell Dazai I said hello."

"Sure."

"We'll talk later."

"We will."

And with that, the line goes dead.

Chuuya doesn't even know what to do with himself, so he just squats down and buries his face in his hands. It's only pneumonia, he tells himself. He'll be all right this time as well. *He will be all right.*

"Chuuya?"

He will be all ri—

"Hey." A hand on Chuuya's shoulder jerks him out of his thoughts, and he spins around, only to have Dazai steady him with a gentle grip around his arms. "What are you doing on the floor?"

He blinks a few times. "I was just... thinking."

Dazai's frown deepens, but it mixes with an amused grin. "Thinking? While dramatically sitting on the floor?"

"Yeah."

Chuuya doesn't want to talk about it. Talking about it would make it more real, and right now — he wants the opposite. And Paul said it would be all right. So there's no need to tell Dazai about it.

"I was doing stretches," Chuuya says and raises his arm over his head, pushing the phone call out of his head, before looping them around Dazai's neck, pressing himself against the lean muscles. "And then I got tired, so I decided to take a break."

Dazai arches one brow. His hands slide down the length of his back, then settle on his hips, thumbs rubbing small circles into the skin. "And what were you stretching for?"

"For you."

Chuuya pushes himself up to reach Dazai's mouth, feeling something in his chest unlock, something like relief, when his lips part for him, Chuuya's hands moving to tug impatiently at clothes, trembling a little.

“Always so eager,” Dazai manages to get out before he gets pushed on the couch and helps Chuuya distract himself from that echoing thought in his head.

It will be all right.

Whenever Chuuya's at the ballet studio, Kouyou's always there as well, which means that even if he wanted to suddenly get up and dance, he couldn't.

And then, one afternoon, Kouyou's late for a doctor's appointment, and suddenly Chuuya's all alone. Him and all that free space. Sitting on the floor, Chuuya regards the exit. He should leave. Go home. But Dazai's still at work. And back in his room, he'd just lie in his bed and try not to worry about the fact that his father's still in the hospital. Twelve days after he was supposed to go home. Somehow his pneumonia turned into a lung abscess. Chuuya facetimes him every single day, and his father sounds fine, keeps saying it will be all right, but everything about this shitty situation makes Chuuya want to scream with frustration.

He wants to go home, but both of his fathers insist he should stop worrying so much.

He wants to stay, and the guilt is suffocating.

So when Chuuya gets to his feet, he doesn't walk to the exit. He needs a distraction, something to keep his mind off all the crap happening in his life.

He already stretched and warmed up — he always does when he's here because it's the only thing he's technically allowed to do — so Chuuya chooses one of his dancing playlists, leaves his phone on the floor, and closes his eyes.

His movements almost happen automatically.

He dances.

Even after nearly a year, every little step and flex of muscle feels like

second nature, like finally coming home.

Chuuya doesn't have his ballet slippers. He's lost a considerable amount of muscle mass. He's lost some of his flexibility. It burns. The back of his ankle throbs distantly. But Chuuya? He feels *alive*.

The music blares through the empty room, Chuuya matching the beats step by step, spinning, his back arching, mouth twisting into a breathless smile as his blood pulses with excitement.

Why did he wait so long to do this again?

His arms spread. He twirls, and — just as his toes push off the ground for a jump, a sharp jolt of pain shoots through his ankle. Chuuya loses his footing, stumbling over his own feet and clumsily falling forward.

Not at all graceful and lithe.

He glowers at his right leg before climbing to his feet again. "Come on," he tells himself as he gets back into position. What's a little plain compared to the flip of his stomach every time he dances? It's not like it can get worse than losing your entire ballet career, right? "Just ignore it."

One. Two. Three.

Chuuya breathes through his nose, and his knees bend before he presses off the floor. Up. Up. Up. His body wobbles as he lands, it hurts, but he pushes through it, picking up pace.

But the pain doesn't go away. It spreads in violent flares until one particular press of toes almost punches the breath out of him, and he all but crumples to the floor, eyes stinging with unshed tears.

His forehead resting against the floor, Chuuya curls his hands into fists.

He's trained his body to withstand pain for so long, so why — why isn't it working anymore? He did everything. He got up early. He trained every day. He spent years bringing his form to perfection. He killed himself, and still, it wasn't enough. One mistake, and — and — a choked-out scream rips through him, and Chuuya slams his fist into the floor. Pain immediately spreads through his knuckles, but at least, it overpowers the one that really hurts. So he does it again. And again.

Somewhere in the back of his head, he knows how silly he must look,

throwing a temper tantrum because he fell down a few times, and the absurdity makes him laugh, even as tears stream down his face.

This is so stupid.

He's so stupid.

"Why can't you just work?" he whispers to himself. "Why...?"

There is no answer except his own ragged breathing. Of course, there isn't. So eventually, when that overpowering rage inside his chest ebbs away into simple exhaustion, Chuuya slumps into a crouched seat, driving a hand over his ankle.

Getting mad over stuff he can't change anymore isn't going to make anything better. This is what he got. This is what he'll have to live with, whether it seems unfair or not. The only thing Chuuya can do is get up and start over again.

Every second Sunday, Dazai's more or less forced to attend family luncheons — something he would have deemed unnecessary considering he has the utmost privilege of seeing his father at work five times a week anyway, and considering Hayashi and the brats aren't important enough to make the trip... if not for the fact that he, at least, gets to see Chuuya. They have to keep it child-friendly when Dazai's family is in the room, but he has long given up on pretending that the only reason he enjoys Chuuya's company is the sex.

Dazai doesn't necessarily understand that feeling inside him. It's new and strange and terribly annoying. Sometimes he hears Chuuya laugh a little too loudly, voice cracking with a snort that startles even him, and Dazai's stomach *flips*. A reaction so absurd that Dazai would have looked for a solution to make it stop if it only didn't feel so good at the same time. So instead, he finds himself leaning into it more and more every time. He's never felt something quite so devastating and physically affecting about anyone, except maybe when he fantasizes about dying, though, thinking about it, these two things are polar opposites, if anything.

The idea of death is comforting. Reassuring. Chuuya and everything about him, on the other hand, terrifies Dazai.

That, and the fact that his father is currently away on business, are ultimately convincing enough to make Dazai attend the luncheon. Now, if only Hayashi would take the kids and make herself scarce,

leaving Chuuya, him, and the food alone, that would be great. Though, the bubbly grin on her face as they sit down at the table is a promise that she will do anything but.

Wonderful.

"How are exams going, Osamu?" she asks before taking a sip of her mimosa.

"Good."

"Do you still have some left?"

"I took the last one yesterday."

His eyes briefly meet Chuuya's, the shared memory of Chuuya sucking him off under the desk while studying for it passing between them. It didn't help Dazai work faster, but it did make something as dull statistics more exciting. Chuuya absently licks his lower lip, mouth curving into a small and private grin before he redirects his gaze on his sushi.

"Congratulations!" Hayashi exclaims. "How did it go?"

"I think I'll pass."

"Of course, you will. You're a smart young man, Osamu."

For the sake of being civil, Dazai offers her an idle smile in reply.

"At least, you'll have some off time now that you work for your father. How's that been treating you, by the way?"

"It's fine."

"I know Gen'emon can be a very... demanding man —"

"That's one way to describe him," Dazai drawls.

"— but that's because he worked so hard to get where he is now." Hayashi shrugs, her smile paler than usual. "I think he just wants the same for you."

Right. Perhaps, that has always been the core of all their problems. He had this one specific image sculpted of his son. Hard-working. Tough. Manly. And even before the two of them lost Dazai's mother, and with her, the one connection that bound them, he failed to meet every

single one of these expectations.

Dazai lets his glass of champagne dance between his fingers as he gazes at Hayashi. Even years later, she's still not any less blind. "Let's leave it at demanding," he says.

Hayashi nods enthusiastically. "So, do you have any plans for your semester break? Aside from working, of course."

Lots of. He just can't mention any of them in front of her.

"I might take one or two more naps."

As if remembering that Chuuya's sitting at the table as well, she turns to him with a wide grin. "It's Chuuya-kun's birthday soon, isn't it?"

"Uh," Chuuya says, "that's still, like, two months away."

"It's never too early to plan a birthday! Have you already thought about what you wanted to do?"

Chuuya shrugs. "Go out to... dinner?"

Hayashi looks confused by his lack of interest. Dazai understands it, has gone out of his way to avoid his birthdays himself, but he does have a few ideas to make it memorable anyway. It's simply worlds away from what Hayashi's most likely thinking.

"Dinner, yes, and afterwards you could invite your friends. Or, I could ask around and see if we could rent you a cl—"

"No big parties," Chuuya cuts in, his voice firm but polite. "I — I almost forgot, but I still have those tickets to Mount Fuji from Fitzgerald's weird lottery." Ah. Dazai remembers that little present. "I guess I could use up some of my vacation time on my birthday if that's all right?"

Hayashi gives him a beaming smile. "Of course, that's all right, honey. A trip to Mount Fuji sounds lovely! I've already been there a couple of times. I can make you a list of things you should definitely see!"

"That'd be great."

"Who's going to be your plus one then?"

Chuuya blinks slowly, opens his mouth. "Uh..."

Dazai takes a sip of his champagne.

Hayashi's eyes travel between the two of them in silence before she lets out a, "Oh!" Chuuya smiles weakly. "Oh, you're going together. That's great! That's... amazing."

"Dazai's the one who dragged me to that party," Chuuya says, scratching the back of his neck. "It's only fair that I take him, right?"

Chuuya glances at him, and Dazai holds his stare with a smile of his own. "Sounds fair to me."

Hayashi somehow manages to turn the conversation around to some prissy client of hers she had to deal with the other day, but Dazai can't help but wonder if this is the point where their luck runs out. Hayashi might be blind at best, willfully ignorant at worst when it comes to her husband, but this? It's not hard to figure out once you start looking. Chuuya's almost every day at Dazai's apartment. Dazai doesn't even see Akiko, his best friend, as often as he sees Chuuya.

If Hayashi suspects anything, she doesn't mention it, happily chatting away.

After lunch, Dazai could drive home — should at least try to be more careful — but he stays anyway, helping Chuuya clear away the dishes. When the sound of Hayashi's footsteps recedes down the hallway, he hears Chuuya let out a soft breath. "I'm sorry. I didn't think things through when I mentioned the trip."

Dazai shrugs. "Taking a trip together isn't illegal."

Judging by the frown tugging between Chuuya's brows, he's not as naive to think so either. "Does no one in your family know?" he asks instead and reaches up on his tiptoes to put away a plate, though he jerks back like he was shot, pressing his lips together.

"No," Dazai replies with a frown. "Are you feeling okay?"

Chuuya nods wordlessly, grabbing the clean silverware instead. "Do you think Hayashi would... mind? If she found out about us?"

"Depends. Would she mind that you're *a guy*, or would she mind that you're her *au pair*?"

"Both?"

"No, and yes."

Dazai never cared and still doesn't about what Hayashi would think. It's the fact that she could tell his father and that? That's an entirely different discussion.

"Can I ask you something else?"

"Chuuya's curious today ~"

"That a *yes*?"

"It's not a *no*."

Chuuya's not happy about that little line, but he gets over it. "Why don't you like her? Hayashi, I mean."

"I don't dislike her. I just don't care about her."

"Okay," Chuuya mutters, "Then let me rephrase. Why don't you care about her? She's been married to your father for how many years now?"

"Eight."

Chuuya raises his brow as if to say *exactly*.

"She married my father. That had nothing to do with me."

"So what, you just ignored her all these years?"

"You make it sound like that's something bad."

"It's not... I guess I would have just gotten lonely. Or tired from doing that."

"I wasn't interested in a stepmother if that's what you're asking." Even less in a stepmother that was naively blind. Some things are simply more unforgivable than others.

The resigning shake of his head means that Chuuya finally decided to drop the subject, so Dazai takes it up himself to steer it into more pleasant waters. “You coming over tomorrow?”

Chuuya lets out a sigh. "I'm chaperoning one of Gin's friend's birthday."

Dazai understands the implication behind it. "Are you free afterwards?"

"No. I promised Tachihara I'd help him prepare for one of his gigs."

"... Sunday?"

"Told him I'd go to his gig as well."

Fuck Tachihara.

"Monday then," Dazai says. "After I get home from work."

The look on Chuuya's face would amuse him if he wasn't aware of the fact that the two days seem so long for them for two entirely different reasons.

"Can't we just..." Chuuya trails off, though, shaking his head. "Nevermind. Hayashi's home. And I'm technically not off until five."

Dazai can't help but tug him closer anyway, stroking his hand up and down the back of his thigh. "Two days, Chuuya. You'll survive."

"*You'll survive*," Chuuya echoes in a voice that does not sound like Dazai at all before he lets his forehead drop to his chest, muffling his grumbling. "I know I will. That doesn't mean I want to."

"Absence makes the heart grow fonder," he murmurs as he slides his fingers through Chuuya's hair and silently realizes: *Oh. It really does.*

"How do I look?"

"Great."

"What about my teeth? Is there anything stuck there?" On cue, Tachihara opens his mouth, granting him a perfect view. "I shouhn't ha' eaten Salach before," he tries to say like that.

"Like anyone would see," Chuuya mutters, but dutifully checks anyway, giving him a thumbs up when it looks good.

"Yeah, but the concert is going to be recorded. And people will take photos. I don't want to be known as the guy with kale in his teeth!"

"You're not going to be known as the guy with kale in his teeth."

Tachihara nods, but his expression screams unconvinced, so Chuuya places his hands on his shoulders as he says, "You're going to be known as the guy with the great voice."

"With the great voice."

"And the insanely good songs."

"Good songs..."

"Tachi, you'll be fine."

"I know." Tachihara shrugs weakly. "It's just a few hundred people. No biggie, right? Totally doable. Cool, cool, cool."

Chuuya can't help but grin. Underneath layers of smirks and macho behavior, Tachihara's still just a kid getting the jitters before his first concert.

It's cute.

Before he can reply, Chuuya's phone buzzes in his pocket, and when he sees that it's his father calling, his expression falls a little. "I have to get this. I'll be there in a minute, yeah?"

"Yeah. Thanks, dude." Tachihara bumps his shoulder before turning away.

Chuuya's been both going out of his mind over his father's hospitalization and trying to distract himself with any desperate measures available, which is why the last two days were hellish. No Dazai. No sex. Just Chuuya and his thoughts. (And the new, annoying pain in his ankle.)

Pulse racing, Chuuya holds the phone to his ear. "Hi, dad. Is everything all right?" It doesn't have to be. They usually talk around this time of day, but if... then he has to hear it right away.

"Not really," he hears Paul's voice say. Chuuya finds the nearest wall, grabbing it for support as he feels his hands beginning to shake. "Your father has been getting worse."

"But he's still —"

"Yes, yes. I'm with him right now, but he's... he's not doing so well. The doctors are talking about surgery."

A tear rolls down Chuuya's cheek, and he hastily wipes it away before pressing out, "I'm going to book the earliest flight I can find."

"I think that's for the best."

The two of them have been so adamant about Chuuya staying here, reassuring him that Arthur will be fine, that a flight home isn't necessary, that these simple words tell more about the severity of the situation than anything else. Chuuya feels more tears well up, warm as they fall and blur his vision.

"Chuuya," his father says, "let someone else drive you to the airport. And don't panic just yet, okay? It'll be all right."

"Yeah," he forces out, "yeah, okay."

"Do you need help with the plane tickets?"

"No, I'll figure it out myself. Just... stay with him."

"I will. Call me before you board the plane, okay?"

"Yeah."

When the line goes dead, Chuuya tries to keep it together; he tries not to fall apart, but he fails miserably.

It's just too much. Everything feels too much.

He doesn't tell anyone goodbye; there's no time for that, and Tachihara will understand. Chuuya catches a cab outside the bar and rattles off an address, telling the driver *to floor it.*

Chapter End Notes

> we're slowlyyyy moving towards angst territory :3 hope you guys are ready

Chapter 14: The City of Love

Akiko declared that they will do a movie night half an hour ago, so when Dazai's doorbell rings, he expects to find his best friend on the other side.

Not Chuuya. His eyeliner smudged around his eyes like he has been crying.

Every single one of Dazai's instincts immediately snap alert. "What happened?" He reaches out to touch him, maybe tug him closer, do something, but Chuuya pushes into the apartment before Dazai can even move. "Chuuya —"

"I need to —" His voice hiccups shakily. "—ook a flight. But it keeps *declining* my payment! And I can't call my father because — because *he's* —" Chuuya's chest stutters when Dazai gently cups his face, forcing him to slow down a little.

"Breathe, Chuuya," Dazai tells him.

"I can't," he shakes his head, tears pooling in his eyes, "I need to book a flight! Now! But it's not working!"

"Look at me."

"Dazai, I —"

"Look at me, and slow down. The world isn't going to stop just because you take a three-second break."

Dazai watches as Chuuya visibly forces the air out of his lungs and then back into them.

"*Now*. Why do you need to book a flight?"

"My father," Chuuya whispers, and his voice makes Dazai's chest clench tightly. Dazai's heard him snap and yell and mutter bitter comments, but not... *this*. He sounds defeated. And Dazai hates that he's virtually powerless to do anything about it. "He's in the hospital, and he's —" Whatever his condition might be, Chuuya doesn't get the words out of his mouth, voice cracking. "I need to see him."

A plethora of questions immediately shoots through Dazai, but he pushes all of that aside for later and instead lifts Chuuya's head ever

so slightly. Dazai can't do anything for his father but plane tickets? Easy. He can do that.

"We'll get you your tickets."

Chuuya's nod is a fragile little thing, but he lets himself be guided to the office, silent as Dazai turns on his computer and gets to work.

The earliest flight is boarding right about now, which means they'll have to take the one five hours later. At times, like this, Dazai wishes he would have started sucking up to his father earlier. Maybe then he could have taken the company jet. As it is, they're stuck with charter planes, but Dazai makes a silent promise to himself to change that soon. Even if it means reconstructing himself a little more after that man's image. Some things are worth the damage.

Chuuya comes back from the bathroom, eyes still red but at least,

not sporting any make-up smudges anymore, and his gaze falls on the printed documents. "Two tickets?" he says, though he makes it sound like a question as he looks up at Dazai. "You don't have to."

"I'm not going to let you fly alone in this state." Being in another country when someone you care about is sick is already scary enough. Chuuya doesn't need a twelve-hour flight all by himself on top of that.

Chuuya sits down and wraps a blanket around himself that Dazai gave him earlier. "What about work?"

Dazai shrugs. "I'll figure something."

"I...." Chuuya's mouth parts and closes around unspoken words before he pulls up his legs and whispers a quiet, "*thank you*."

It's at that moment that Dazai hears the sound of his door opening, followed by the familiar sound of stilettos clacking against his marble floors.

Ah, shit.

The movie night.

"Hello?" Akiko's voice sings, her steps coming closer. "You better be decent. I've seen enough dicks today already."

"In here," Dazai calls.

"Oh, so he *lives*. Care to explain why you've been ignoring my last ten messages? It's not like I'm the — oh." Akiko stops short in the doorway of the office. "Chuuya's here. Has anyone ever told you, boys, that it's rude making me the designated third wheel? I could have called Ozaki and made it into a foursome..." She trails off when neither of them cracks a smile. "All right. Something happened. Are you going to let me in on it, or am I supposed to figure it out myself?"

Dazai's not sure how much Chuuya's willing or ready to share just yet, so he lifts the tickets with a contrived smile. "Change of plans. I'm going to France."

She arches one perfect brow, and Dazai gives her a *long story* look that will have to be enough for now.

"Cool," Akiko says and lets her bag drop. "I'm going, too. I've always wanted to visit *the city of love*."

Chuuya huffs out a breath. "This isn't some sort of vacation —"

"Trust me, darling, I can see that, but you look like you're going to break apart at any moment," her gaze travels to Dazai, "and you will be too focused on Chuuya to take care of yourself, and therefore, you both need *me*. So I'm going."

Dazai doesn't mind, especially because her presence could be used in both their favor if anyone asks, but he looks at Chuuya first before replying. "Is this okay with you?"

"Whatever," he mutters before getting up. "I need to grab a few things before we leave. Can we stop by the house?"

"Of course."

Chuuya's the first out of the office, leaving Dazai and Akiko alone.

"You are in *so deep*," she tells him with one of those looks. It's not disapproving but full of honest concern, and Dazai doesn't appreciate it one bit.

"His father is sick and in the hospital. What I'm supposed to do? Give him a pat on the shoulder and send him off?"

As she pushes away from the desk, Akiko smiles. "Most people would drive them to the airport, not accompany them to their doorstep a few thousand miles away."

"Because most people don't have the means to."

"Or the heart."

Dazai frowns as he follows her. Deep down, he knows he cares for Chuuya; knows he's not immune to the human parts of him that rekindle whenever they're together, but sometimes he wonders what will happen if he leans too far into this feeling. He wonders if he'll *fall*.

This entire day — or night — feels like a blurry nightmare. Somewhere between getting the phone call before Tachihara's concert and ringing Dazai's doorbell, Chuuya's mind turned on autopilot and has since refused to switch it off, leaving him in a drowsy, anxious state throughout the flight. He sees Dazai and Yosano trying their best to distract him, talking about this and that, asking him for input on what movie to watch, and offering him snacks — ones he would usually love. But even if Chuuya wanted to talk right now, he simply couldn't. He keeps staring at his phone even though it won't ring thousands of miles up in the air.

It will ring once they land, though.

And Chuuya doesn't know if he's ready to hear what will be on the other end of it.

So he just looks at it, foolishly hoping for a sudden superpower that will grant him the ability to make wishes come true.

At one point, he dozes off, slipping into a deep sleep that, at least, makes all his fears and worries disappear for a while as he leans into the warm and solid thing next to him. Chuuya all but startles awake when the plane jerks a little, and when the turbulences quiet down again, he notices that the thing he's been clinging to, like his life depends on it, is, in fact, Dazai's arm. With heavy eyelids, Chuuya first blinks up at him, then down to his phone.

Dazai must notice his gaze because he turns his head a little. "Are you comfortable?"

Chuuya nods, more interested in the black pages on Dazai's screen. "What are you reading?"

"It's called *Deathless*."

"Is it about zombies?"

He feels Dazai's chest rumble with a soft puff of laughter. "No, it's about a *Koschei the deathless* and *Marya Morevna*. A Russian folklore with a few... modifications."

"What kind of modifications?"

"Koschei is a handsome young man instead of the hideous, old fart that he's usually portrayed as."

Chuuya smiles and immediately feels a stab of guilt, making him sigh heavily. "I didn't you know we're into this kind of thing."

"There's a lot you don't know." Dazai's free hand tucks a strand of hair behind his ear, and Chuuya's eyes flutter shut, leaning further into him and trying to disappear inside his warmth. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm just tired," he murmurs.

"We can push the seat back, so you can stretch out —" Dazai starts to move, but Chuuya clutches tighter around him, refusing to move.

"No, no, stay."

Dazai freezes.

Chuuya swallows and whispers, "Just like this."

Dazai doesn't say anything, but his body slowly relaxes again, allowing Chuuya to melt against his side. And for a while, they remain like that. Dazai reading. Chuuya not quite asleep, not really awake either, only catching the occasional phrase from the book. After some time, Dazai gets out his earphones and wordlessly offers one to him. Chuuya accepts, and listening to soft, relaxing music, holding onto Dazai, he manages to fall asleep again.

Dazai can feel Chuuya all but swaying with high-strung energy when the plane touches the ground, his leg tapping like he's trying to drill a hole into the floor, and eyes darting over to his phone over and over again — so much that Dazai considers stealing it.

(For the sake of everyone involved, he decides against it.)

"Hey," he says instead (like a fool). "You're going to be all right."

Chuuya can't even look at him. "You don't know that."

It's the truth.

Dazai's not sure when he started being someone who makes frivolous promises. Then again, his common sense seems to flee whenever it comes to Chuuya.

"You're right, but whatever happens, you have us."

Chuuya opens his mouth, and then his eyes dart to him, wide and terrified. "I'm scared, Dazai. What if — what if my father calls and it's — it's —"

What if it's too late?

"What if he calls and says that the surgery went well?" Dazai suggests instead.

"Don't give me stupid fucking hope."

"I'm giving you realistic probabilities."

They had lots of time over the flight, and part of that, they spent talking about his father's condition. Dazai is still mildly annoyed that he heard about it this late. He would have assumed Chuuya would trust him enough to tell him about personal matters like these, but what aggravates Dazai even more is that he should have noticed Chuuya's strange behavior himself.

He's always been good at reading people, so how come he suddenly misses something so obvious when it comes to the one person that actually matters?

"90% of lung abscesses heal without any complications."

The plane comes to a stop, and Dazai barely listens to the captain's goodbyes, though he can't help but frown when the passengers start clapping.

Akiko, who has spent a good portion of the time sleeping with a silky black blindfold and her AirPods, turns to shoot Chuuya a questioning look. "The fuck?"

"It's a thing here." Chuuya cringes. "Don't ask *me*. I don't get it either." His expression falls when his phone chimes with several messages. Dazai silently watches him open them, so he doesn't expect Chuuya to grab his hand, squeezing it desperately as he reads, and finally,

finally, lets out a long breath.

"Dad says the surgery went okay," he whispers before turning to Dazai. "He's still asleep, but he's — he's *fine*."

Dazai brushes his thumb over the delicate skin on Chuuya's hand. "Told you."

As people around them move to get up, Akiko grabs her traveling bag and squeezes Chuuya's shoulder. "I say this calls for a celebratory glass of champagne. Or coffee. Or both."

Dazai skips the champagne, ignoring the fact that he's made this choice because he will be meeting Chuuya's fathers soon in person, which he doesn't want to do reeking of booze, but he's content watching Chuuya and Akiko down a fun-sized bottle each before they call a cab. Because of the time difference, the night in Paris is just beginning, making the last twenty-four hours feel never-ending.

Tomorrow, Dazai will have to call his father. Hayashi already knows, having made Chuuya a thousand tearful promises that it's okay and that she would be more than welcome to have him back if or when his father gets better, but Dazai asked her to leave Gen'emon to him. Yosano's presence here will make things easier but not entirely uncomplicated.

For now, though, Dazai just breathes in the foreign night air and focuses on the present. Today, he's on Chuuya's side of the world, and he's itching to see what he will find here.

During the ride, Chuuya's a bit more talkative, pointing out a few shops and buildings that they pass. Dazai feels Chuuya's spine stiffen when they pull up in front of the hospital, the tension not leaving him throughout the whole process of finding his father either.

A talk with the receptionist and a phone call with Paul later, they're all walking down a dimly lit hallway. Then at the very end of it, someone steps out of one of the rooms. The man is tall, rivaling Dazai with his height, and he has long, blond hair tied into a braid and elegant features. The thing that makes him stand out as Chuuya's parent is the way he carries himself, though.

That much, Dazai can see before Chuuya kicks off at the speed of sunlight and runs into his father's open arms, throwing himself around him.

Dazai swallows, feeling like he has to look away. Next to him, he hears a muffled sniffle, and when he turns to Akiko, she's wiping her eyes with her sleeve.

"Are you crying?"

"No," she snaps with a glare. "I just have something in my eye."

"Hmm."

Dazai doesn't blame her.

After seeing Chuuya so defeated, Dazai much prefers the sight of him clinging to his father. Somewhere deep down, hidden behind layers and layers of obscure lies, something else lingers, though. Something that feels like festering jealousy. Dazai's not sure if he wants to be the one doing the hugging or the one getting crushed in a hug. He doesn't want to find out.

Once Chuuya unwraps himself, he talks to his father in hushed French before eventually turning around and waving the two of them closer.

Dazai doesn't get nervous because that would require caring, but he supposes this is one of these *crucial moments.*

This is Chuuya's father.

And if this thing is supposed to ever go beyond casual sex — and Dazai's planning to make Chuuya realize that it *does* — then this man, and the one lying in the hospital bed right now, will be an essential part of Dazai's life someday.

Luckily, Dazai has always managed to make a good impression on parents — on everyone's except his own, that is.

"Dad," Chuuya says. "Meet Dazai and Yosano. Guys, this is my dad."

His father offers both of them a smile, then gives Dazai his hand. "I'm glad to finally meet you in person, Dazai, even if it is under such circumstances."

The shake is firmer than he expected.

"Likewise, sir," Dazai replies in French.

"Call me Paul." Then he turns to Akiko. "I've seen you in photos. Thank you so much for being on Chuuya's side."

"Don't worry about it," Akiko drawls. They were in the same French class back in school, sharing the highest marks. "It's the least we can do for him."

Chuuya looks more relaxed than before, even though his gaze keeps darting to the room Paul came out of. "Would you mind waiting a bit outside?" he asks, scratching the back of his neck. "I know, it's shitty, but it's late; only family is allowed."

Akiko waves her hand. "Don't worry about us."

"We'll get some more coffee," Dazai adds. "Call me when you're ready?" Chuuya holds his gaze, nodding silently as if to say thank you.

The little touches and gestures have probably spoiled Dazai too much because right now, he has to press his nails into his skin, creating crescent moons, because all he wants to do is go over there and

kiss him, but they're miles away from that future, and according to Chuuya, they will never reach it either.

It's a gamble, and Dazai is willing to bear the costs, even if he has to hurt for it.

"I like how devoted your friends are."

Chuuya only half-listens as he enters the room and sees his father lying in the white hospital bed. His skin has acquired a ghostly pallor, looking nearly translucent in contrast to his ink-black hair. There are a shit ton of tubes and wires, but — but, he's still breathing, he's still here, and that's the most important thing, right?

"He hasn't woken up yet?"

"It was a strenuous surgery," Paul says as he settles down in the chair next to him. He seems perfectly okay, but when Chuuya takes a longer look, he can spot the cracks in his armor. More wrinkles on his face than usual. Eyebags. His braid looks like it was done days ago — and that must truly mean something.

Swallowing, Chuuya looks away and grabs Arthur's hand instead, squeezing as if his body will warm up if he tries hard enough. "I'm so sorry I wasn't here. I should have come back the second —"

"Chuuya."

He looks up, on the verge of tears again because this is *so* fucked up. These are his *parents*. The people who gave him a proper home when he was ready to give up all hope. And what does Chuuya do? He -

"You couldn't have known this would happen."

"But he always gets si—"

"And you can't throw away everything every time it happens. We are your parents. You are our kid. We're supposed to look after you, not the other way around."

Chuuya lets out a long breath, one that he seems to have been holding for weeks now. "I just want him to be okay," he murmurs.

"He will be. Give him time."

They just sit there for a few silent moments, but when Chuuya accidentally yawns for the fifth time, Paul gets up. "Call your friends, and get home. Get some sleep. Only come back when you don't look like a dead man standing anymore."

"But dad —"

"I'm not asking you."

Chuuya would argue more, but his father does have a point. If he stays here any longer, he will fall asleep, and he has Dazai and Yosano waiting somewhere for him, probably just as exhausted.

"I'll stay here until your father wakes up," Paul says, guiding him out of the door, "and come for a change of clothes in the morning. Do you need a key?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Here. There should be food in the fridge, but if you can't find anything, I can give you some money for food —"

"That's fine. I have my own."

"Chuuya —"

"Dad," he huffs. Back in Yokohama, Chuuya actually managed to save up quite a lot of the monthly salary he gets because the damn family insists on paying every time he's out with either Dazai or the Tsushimas. And his father probably has enough worries than paying

for a three people meal right now, so. "I've got it. Really."

"You're still as stubborn as ever," Paul grumbles as he pulls Chuuya into his chest and ruffles his hair.

"Not going to change any time soon."

"Good."

There's this weird, bubbly feeling tingling in his arms when Chuuya, for the first time in months, unlocks the door of his home. Dazai — and Akiko — are about to see his whole life, and even though it shouldn't be anything crazy by now — after all, Chuuya is living in theirs — it still feels huge somehow. Probably because Chuuya never anticipated this to happen.

Stepping inside, the smell is the first thing that hits him. A healthy mix of his fathers' colognes, vanilla candles, lemongrass, and — home. Just *home.*

"And this is it," Chuuya murmurs and awkwardly steps to the side as they all pile into the hallway. It's not tiny, but it is a tight fit compared to what both of them are probably used to. Chuuya glances around the apartment, looking for any changes. As far as he knows, everything should be the same aside from a few new curtains that Arthur passionately texted him about. Nothing has changed. Their cozy kitchen, filled to the brim with pots and kettles and decorations that aren't really necessary. A living room with a hideous yellow couch. And —

"Baki!" Chuuya crouches down and spreads his arm as his favorite animal in the entire world runs towards him. *His french bulldog.* Her tail is wagging so hard that she all but topples over in front of him, wheezing and woofing excitedly. "Hello, my darling! Hey, beautiful! Hello —" She jumps onto him, trying to lick his face, and Chuuya laughs as he tries to pet her — which is harder than it sounds when she's having the most epic meltdown of the century. "Have you missed me? Yeah, I missed you too! I missed you so much!"

Yosano crouches down next to him, still in her heels, and stretches out her hand. "Aren't you a chunky little thing?"

Chuuya lets out a breathless giggle and glances at Dazai, brows furrowing when he sees him staying five feet away from Baki. Come to think of it, he's never seen Dazai even pet Diabolo once, but he always

assumed it's just Dazai's nature. This speaks for something else, though. Dazai's eyes meet his, and Chuuya sees his walls go up as he summons a half-smile before offering Chuuya a hand to help him up. His nose crinkles. "You smell like dog."

"Baki smells wonderful," Chuuya retorts. "Don't insult her."

Dazai holds up his hands.

Huffing, Chuuya tries to shake out his muscles a little. It's been long, god knows how many hours, and yet he still can't get rid of the tension; he won't be able to until his father wakes up.

Chuuya lets Dazai and Akiko check out the rest of the apartment and snoop around as he checks the fridge for something edible, too exhausted to even care that they might discover something embarrassing in his room, considering the state he left it in on the day of his flight to Yokohama. Like a fucking bomb of clothes exploded there.

There's some leftover chicken soup, and even though it's midnight, Chuuya grabs and places it on the stove to reheat it. Time isn't real anyway.

Somewhere in the other room, he hears Yosano say, "Awww, look at his chubby cheeks!"

Chuuya rolls his eyes.

"That's a mean expression he has going there," Dazai remarks next, sounding vaguely amused. "He looks like he wants to punch whoever's behind the camera."

They're most likely talking about the photo taken on Christmas eve in front of the Eiffel tower. Chuuya's first year with Paul and Arthur, and his first Christmas that he actually got to celebrate like in the movies, except back then, the whole affair made his blood boil. Chuuya had been so used to being tossed away like a wet rug every time that when the opposite happened, he didn't *understand*. And he hated that. He hated not knowing their motives, he hated their carefree smiles, and he hated — well, he hated pretty much everything.

So when they asked some random tourist to take a photo of the three of them, Chuuya made sure to show them exactly how much he hated it, as if part of him wanted to be abandoned again. Sooner rather than later.

Because being left by people you've known for a few months is easier than being rejected by someone you've grown to love.

Thinking back on it, Chuuya can only shake his head. Over the years, his fathers put up with a lot of shit from him, and still, they never left.

The rich smell of soup thankfully lures Dazai and Yosano away from the framed pictures on the walls and into the kitchen. Together, they sit down at the table and eat, quietly discussing the plan for tomorrow. First, the hospital. If Arthur wakes up and feels better — *when* he does, Chuuya could imagine taking the two of them out and show them around the city. Yosano already announced she'd have to fly back in two nights because of her job. Dazai's stay depends on his phone call with his father. And whether Chuuya will return because that — well, that's still up in the air.

He has no doubts his fathers will tell him to go back to Yokohama and finish his au pair year, and it's not like Chuuya wants to stay in Paris and bide his time until college starts. He has friends in Yokohama. He still has things left to experience, things to do. He hasn't even said a proper goodbye to everyone.

Glancing at Dazai, thoughtfully slurping on his soup, Chuuya's chest tightens.

He's isn't ready to end this. Whatever this is. Not yet.

He thought they still had some time left until, at least, October, and — Chuuya's not ready. Life doesn't give a shit whether someone's ready or not, though; it simply happens, and if his father's condition doesn't get better...

Chuuya wouldn't ever be able to live with himself if he simply went back to Japan.

By the time they're finished eating, a thick layer of exhaustion settles over all of them, making it impossible to keep their eyes open, let alone move, so Chuuya drags himself to work on preparing the couch. He feels a bit guilty for making Yosano sleep there, but he can't exactly give her his parents' bed, and the couch isn't big enough for two people. With a dapper huff, Yosano accuses him of worrying too much and even declares that she's slept in worse places.

A picture-perfect princess like her, it's hard to imagine, but Chuuya knows there's far more to her than meets the eye.

When, at last, the door of his room — all tidied up since he last stood here — falls shut, engulfing him in darkness, Chuuya swallows around the fluttering nerves in his throat as he walks to his bed. A bed that has Dazai in it. It's not huge, which means they'll be pretty close, which isn't that big of a deal anymore, really. It isn't, but... Chuuya's 99% certain that his father will check in on him later when he comes home, and he'll be met with them. *Together*.

Whatever.

He's too tired to give a fuck right now.

Once Chuuya crawls under the sheet, he blindly reaches for Dazai. "You awake?"

There's the rustling sound of shifting, Dazai rolling over to face him, he assumes. "Yeah."

"Hi."

"Hello." Chuuya rests his head on his pillow. "I like your home."

"Thanks. I like yours too."

He feels Dazai snort softly. "I especially like your bedsheets. *Spiderman*, huh?"

Oh god. Even though it's too dark to make out anything, Chuuya clasps his hands over his eyes anyway, groaning under his breath. "They're from when I was nine!" He got them during his superhero phase — though that technically lasted up until a few years ago — and never bothered to throw the sheets away because Arthur always insisted they could keep them for *"just in case."*

"Mmm," Dazai hums and somehow manages to find his cheek and pinch it. "I saw your Halloween pictures too." Chuuya groans even louder, though when he realizes how that must sound like from outside the room, he stifles it, his embarrassment bleeding into muffled laugher. "You do make a very cute *Spidey*."

"Shut up," he hisses with aching cheeks, slapping Dazai's hand away though it only makes Dazai grab his waist in a laughable attempt at suffocating him in his chest, "like you didn't wear stuff like that as a kid! I bet you loved batman!"

"I never watched those superhero movies," Dazai says. "Too unrealistic

for my tastes."

"What kind of kid even pays attention to that?" Chuuya huffs as he tries to wiggle out of this damn octopus.

"Me."

"So you were always this pretentious?"

"If you mean smart, then yes. I was born smart."

"*Not* what I meant." It does make him wonder what Dazai's childhood looked like. Probably a lot fancier than Chuuya's, yeah, but also shallow. Kind of empty. Dazai's friendly with Hayashi, but that's just an act, according to him. Dazai's father is... his father and not a nice one. He barely talks to Ryuu and Gin.

That childhood sounds lonely.

"Marvel and DC might not be super realistic," Chuuya murmurs, "but they're fun. We should watch them someday."

"We haven't managed to actually finish a single movie so far," Dazai ever so helpfully points out. He's not wrong. Movies always end up in orgasms.

"Well, aren't geniuses supposed to be good at multi-tasking?" Chuuya whispers, pressing his hand against Dazai's chest and letting them trail up slowly. "What's stopping you from fucking me and watching a movie?"

Dazai mirrors the touch on his hipbone. "I'd be an idiot to pay attention to anything other than you when you're naked and making all those lovely sounds."

Chuuya squeezes his eyes closed. Why is it that he always ends up worked up, no matter how innocent the conversation starts out as?

And why does Dazai always have to sound so — so *romantic*! He's aware it's mostly just flirting and Dazai being way too good with words, but sometimes it feels like more. So much more.

"Good night," Chuuya blurts out in a breathy whisper.

Dazai's brief silence speaks for his surprise at the abrupt change of direction, but he does get out a, "Night, chibi" a few seconds later, and slowly his fingers slip away from him.

Chuuya immediately misses his touch, even if it's for the best right now.

Everybody part of Dazai is really distracting, and here in Chuuya's bed, right next to the living room and too far away from the bathroom, they'd be stranded with just a few tissues and lube that Chuuya'd have to look for first. So sleep it is. As exciting and nice as the prospect of sex would sound right now...

Sleep.

Chuuya lets out a deep breath and stretches out his legs, too exhausted to even notice he's tangling them with Dazai's.

Sleep.

Chapter 15: Best Friend

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Before he boarded the plane that would take them to Paris, Dazai made an unadorned but rational prediction. He assumed that stepping foot into Chuuya's word would sate his endless fascination — *somewhat*, at least, because there can only be so much a person can want, right?

Instead, for the first time in a long while, Dazai finds himself dead wrong.

If anything, eating in Chuuya's kitchen, sleeping in his bed, discovering a side of him that's different, a little wrinkled but that much more real and, at its core, still the same, only makes Dazai hungrier, makes him crave even more. He wants the little details, no matter how unimportant they seem to bystanders. He wants to look at every framed picture and memorize all twenty-one different pouts and grumpy glares until they're etched into his brain. He wants to be the one to talk Chuuya down when he's upset. He wants to be on the other end of the hallway when Chuuya runs into someone's arms. He wants mornings like *this*, seeing Chuuya snore with his mouth open and arms thrown out like a starfish, for the rest of his life.

Dazai has never wanted anything like he wants this.

Like he wants Chuuya.

Across from him, Chuuya's eyes flutter open after a particular heavy snore, and Dazai realizes that he wants it so much, it even hurts a little. Is that what *falling* means, then? Did he lean too far out?

"Morning," Chuuya mumbles, stretching out his arms and nearly punching Dazai in the face because it was lying on his chest a moment ago. "Stop looking like that."

"Like what?" Dazai asks.

"Like that." Chuuya frowns hazily. "'s creepy." After his fourth yawn, he rolls over and checks his phone, sitting up once reads the time, a heavy sigh leaving his chest. "It's almost twelve. My father's probably home from the hospital."

Bearing news. Ones that could make or break everything.

"Do you want to talk to him alone?"

To his surprise, Chuuya shakes his head. "I... Can you come with me?"

As if Dazai could ever say *no*.

And so over coffee and croissants, Dazai watches as Chuuya's face lights up like the sun itself when Paul informs him that his husband not only woke up last night but has felt a tiny bit better since. Dazai spent the last day hoping for this outcome, though admittedly, for the wrong reasons. If Arthur got worse, Chuuya would no doubt remain here, and that would disrupt all of Dazai's plans.

It would have ruined everything.

It's a selfish reason to wish for someone else's recovery. Some people might even call it inhuman, but Dazai has never pretended to be anything other than that.

Judging by the calculating looks sent Dazai's way, he's now certain that Paul also saw the two of them in bed this morning. Dazai woke up with a handful of hair in his mouth, which means they spent the entire night entangled. Dazai doesn't particularly mind that his father knows there is more to them than what Chuuya told him. But the look in Paul's eyes has changed. Yesterday, he seemed tired but kind. Now, his eyes are sharp. Measuring.

It reminds Dazai of himself.

Paul drives all of them to the hospital. Again, Dazai and Akiko pay a visit to the gift shop to give Chuuya and his family some much-needed privacy. Akiko is inspecting glass figurines on a shelf when Dazai's phone rings with an incoming call. He finds himself in a quiet corner before picking up.

"Father."

"Dazai," his voice is calm. Too calm, "Explanation. Now."

The tricky part is leaving Chuuya out of this as much as possible. Dazai can handle his father, but the thought of getting Chuuya caught in the crossfire between them makes his stomach curl with dread. So instead, he spins the truth that is already out there in what he hopes will be his favor.

"Akiko insisted on accompanying Chuuya when he flew back to France, and I couldn't let her go alone, could I? Her parents wouldn't want that."

He can practically hear his father think even from thousands of miles away. "Is that so?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps if you had taken such care of her earlier, you two would have been together still." Dazai doesn't even bet an eyelash at that. That's nothing compared to what he anticipated. "I expect you back at work tomorrow."

With the time difference, it leaves him with only today. Not much, but enough to make sure that Chuuya will be fine. And that he will *return*.

"I can do that," Dazai says, and then he tentatively adds, "Thank you, father."

"Don't thank me. Sort out your fucking priorities instead. For once in your goddamn life. And, Dazai?"

"Yes?"

"You owe me a favor now."

"Fair enough."

The line goes dead.

As soon as he hangs up, though, Dazai's phone buzzes again, this time with a message from Chuuya, telling him that Arthur would like to meet the two of them.

"Are you nervous?" Akiko asks, elbowing him when the elevator doors slide shut.

"No," Dazai says.

"Really? I was when I met Kouyou's mother. A tiny, little bit."

Dazai frowns. "You already met her mother?" When did that happen, and why has he not heard about it?

"Yes, and she *loved* me. Well, she said I had good posture and would look great in a ballet costume, which I assume means as much." When

Dazai's scowl doesn't ease, she clicks her tongue. "Perhaps if you made more time for your awesome best friend once in a while, you would have known earlier. I was going to tell you on our movie night."

"I'm sorry, I... am still acclimating to my new schedule."

"I know," she says. "Your dad's keeping you busy, huh?"

The elevator hums, and Dazai nods wordlessly. It's not the difficulty of the work; it's the amount of it. And the fact that Dazai would prefer doing anything else. It gets tiring after a while.

As they walk down the same hallway they did yesterday, she links her arm with his. "I'm more than aware that you sometimes disappear, darling, and with your father and classes, I realize that it can probably get a little much."

"I just have to get used to it," Dazai murmurs. "It will be fine."

"You're human. It's okay not to be, once in a while."

Funny, that's what Chuuya said, too. It's the fact that Dazai struggles with something so simple and mundane that, frankly, embarrasses him, though. He's smarter than 95% of the population. He knows how to pull people's strings. He doesn't lack anything. And still.

When they enter the hospital room, Arthur, awake and sitting up in his bed, is the first to notice them. His smile is weak but genuine. "Dazai," he says. "And Yosano?"

Dazai nods as he shakes his hand with one of his best smiles, aware that Chuuya's watching everything with a muted grin. "It's lovely to finally meet you in person, sir."

"You're looking good," Akiko adds. "I'm glad to hear the surgery went well."

"I was lucky," Arthur says, folding his hands together. "You're studying to become a surgeon from what I heard, yes? I'm sure you'll get to see these kinds of things a lot more up close soon. Nasty things."

"Oh, trust me, I can't wait to dissect these nasty things."

Dazai uses the time to give Chuuya a once-over. He looks lighter, with fewer shadows on his face, like a weight has fallen off his shoulder. They all got lucky.

"Dazai," he hears Arthur say next. "You are so much taller than you looked like in the video chats. Chuuya, honey, you should have told us your friend is a giant."

Chuuya's smile bleeds into a mildly annoyed scowl. "He's not *that* tall."

Dazai teasingly pats his head. "Don't be jealous. Maybe if you start drinking one glass of milk each day until your birthday, god will grant you some inches —"

"Fuck off, asshole."

"Chuuya, be nice," Arthur reprimands him. "I thought that living abroad would, at least, help with the cussing."

"Oh, he's polite," Dazai drawls. "Just not to me."

Akiko claps his shoulder in support. "Dazai's *special*."

Chuuya ignores both of them in favor of crossing his arms. "You two raised me. Of course, I'm going to cuss."

"Language can be so much more beautiful than insults, Chuuya," Paul says, and Dazai finds himself agreeing. Well, he wouldn't say beautiful. But useful. They can come in handy.

"Should we ask the nurses for more chairs?" Arthur asks, already glancing out of the door. "I'm sure sleeping on that tiny couch wasn't any good for your backs. Or did one of you sleep on the floor?" His gaze innocently darts between Yosano and Dazai.

For once, Dazai finds himself waiting for Chuuya to speak because Paul most likely saw them and lying about it... well, it's not a good look.

"Uh," Chuuya's the first to say, "Dazai slept on my floor." He scratches the side of his neck — one of his ticks when he's nervous. "You said it yourself. Dazai's tall. He would have never fit on the couch."

"Oh," Arthur says with a nod. "Now that I think about it, yes."

"And besides," Chuuya adds, "I was going to show them a bit around the city if you don't mind?"

His father's face immediately softens. "Of course not, honey. Go ahead, and have fun. It's not every day you visit Paris, huh?"

"I am going to take so many pictures," Akiko announces. "I've dreamed of visiting ever since I was a little girl."

Arthur smiles. "Well, you took such good care of our son that —"

"*Daaad.*"

"— that our home will always be open for you whenever you want to visit."

"Be careful," Akiko says with a wink. "I will take you up on that offer."

"We don't mind. Right, Chuuya?"

Chuuya's eyes flicker to Dazai as he nods. "Yeah. Not at all."

There's not enough time for Chuuya to show them everything he would like to, but knowing Dazai and Yosano, he doubts they want one of those typical sightseeing tours anyway — except the *Eiffel Tower*. Yosano insists on seeing that. They'll be fine with a bit of shopping and then a cozy brunch somewhere. So that's what they do.

They stroll through Montmartre, take pictures in front of the Sacré-Cœur,

ride the subway, each with a new pair of retro sunglasses they bought from a pretty pushy but funny gentleman, Chuuya posts a mirror selfie of them on his Snapchat story, they check out a few stores in Marais and, at last, they stop for a dessert break in a cute, little café.

Chuuya's eyes all but roll back in his head as he takes the first bite of a Paris-brest — his, arguably, most favorite pastry in the whole wide world. Sweet, holy Jesus invades his taste buds. Fuck, he's missed this.

"Gosh," Yosano moans around a macron, "this is delicious. Think I can buy the entire shop and take it back with me tomorrow?"

Dazai's grin is slow. "If you ask nicely."

Right. Chuuya nearly forgot about that. "What'd your father say?" he asks, glancing at Dazai.

"He expects me home tomorrow."

Now that Chuuya feels more... like himself instead of the empty shell that he has been before his father woke up, he can't help but feel

guilty that the two of them had to accompany him here. Yosano doesn't seem all too upset about it, but Dazai had to miss work. Surely, his father didn't simply accept that?

"We'll make up for this short visit with next time," Yosano cuts through his thoughts. "How about next Christmas? Does it snow here?"

Chuuya makes a face. "It hasn't in years."

She sighs. "Well, snow's not that important. Do you think your fathers would mind having us here on the holidays?" Before he can answer, she shakes her head. "Wait, we'd have to stay in a hotel anyway. Ozaki would claw my eyes out if I go to Paris without her again. She's already threatened me, like, three times ever since I told her where I am. How was I supposed to predict this would happen?"

Next Christmas.

Technically, that's ten months away, but it's a crisp reminder that Chuuya's time with them is limited. He looks at Dazai and finds him already staring unabashedly. Chuuya tilts his head, narrowing his eyes. "Do I have something on my face?"

"Crumbs."

"Oh."

"Here, let me." Invading his personal space, Dazai brushes his thumb against Chuuya's lower lip, making his whole body buzz with this one simple movement, the air in his lungs growing hot. When Dazai leans back, he drapes one arm over the back of his chair as he considers him. "Have you already decided whether you'll come back?"

It takes Chuuya a few embarrassing moments to get his thoughts in order. "I talked about it to my dads. They want me to finish the au pair year."

"But?"

Chuuya drives a hand through his hair. "I guess I'm just nervous that this will happen again. Arthur is immunocompromised, so flu season is always hard on him, but I..." He glances between the two of them, worrying his lip between his teeth. "Am I a bad person for still wanting to go back?"

"Darling," Yosano says, sliding her hands over the table to grasp his,

"you are allowed to think of yourself once in a while."

"But they're my parents —"

"And they want you to live your life," Dazai says calmly. "If something happens again, I'll personally fly my father's company jet to get you back here as fast as possible."

Chuuya lets out a breath. Whatever choice he makes, he will never be 100% satisfied. Something will always feel wrong. Still, he says, "I'll stay for another week or two until my father is released from the hospital, but afterwards..."

Yosano squeezes his hands. "You'll come back to us?"

"I'd like that, yeah."

When his gaze flickers to Dazai, his brown eyes soften. "We'd like that, too."

Chuuya's phone buzzes with a notification, and he fishes it out of his pocket, assuming it's a text from his dads, or maybe Kouyou, who's been offering him support through texts, or literally anyone but *him*.

"Why do you look like you want to drop-kick your phone across the room?" Yosano questions next to him.

"My ex just replied to my story," he murmurs, holding his thumb an inch shy of his screen, this close to opening it, even though the only thing he should do is block him. Never think of that motherfucker again.

"Is that a good or a bad thing?"

Chuuya momentarily lifts his eyes and sees Yosano try to pin her best friend with a glare that demands an answer, but Dazai's eyes are only on him. "The one...?"

Chuuya nods wordlessly.

Something rhapsodically dark passes over his face, but as always, Dazai's quick to flatten any genuine emotion whatsoever by cocking his head lazily. "Well, are you going to open it?"

Chuuya wants to say *no*, but curiosity is a tempting and lecherous thing.

Lethal, too, but satisfaction is even stronger, right?

"I want to know what he said." A breath later, Chuuya finally opens the damn thing. "I'm not going to..." He trails off upon seeing the two short texts.

Romaine: so you're back

Romaine: want to grab a coffee?

What part of the picture he posted even remotely suggests that he wants to meet the motherfucker that *cheated* on him?

"He wants to see me," Chuuya tells them with a scoff, "for coffee."

"Well, tell him to eat shit," Yosano suggests nonchalantly.

"Tell him you already had coffee," Dazai says. "Better one."

As amusing as that sounds, Chuuya has an even better idea.

Without thinking much of it, he grabs Dazai's hand, intertwining their fingers — admiring how aesthetically pleasing they look together for one single moment — before he snaps a picture of it.

As he uploads it to his story, deliberately leaving Romaine on *read*, he hears Yosano snicker. "Atta boy."

He feels both vindicated and a little childish once it's done, but sue him. Chuuya needs this one fucking win.

"Okay, but now I need to see pictures. Pronto," Yosano demands, and Chuuya grudgingly finds Romaine's Instagram because he deleted all of their photos together the day before his flight to Yokohama. As soon as she gets a good look, Yosano lets out a laugh. "Please, don't tell me you dated one of those guys who takes pictures squatting down with a bottle of beer?"

"I was *fourteen* when we met." And clearly, *stupid as shit.*

"Look at this travesty." She shows the next picture to Dazai, and Chuuya pointedly turns away, pinching his nose as he wonders what went through his fourteen-year-old head back then. Okay, it wasn't all bad — they had their good moments! — but looking back now... it gives him the heebie-jeebies.

"Dazai's so much prettier," Yosano comments as she hands him his

phone back. "You leveled up, darling."

It's strange comparing Dazai to Romain because not only is this not an actual relationship or anything of the sort, but the two of them are also a completely different part of his life.

It's windy outside when they leave the shop, heading for the metro, and Chuuya rubs his hands together, starting to regret the decision not to have put on a fucking beanie or something. Next to him, Yosano accepts a phone call with a tired, "hello, mother" before finding a more quiet corner.

Chuuya blinks when all of a sudden Dazai places his merlot-colored scarf around his neck, which, actually, makes him feel so much warmer, but —

"You'll get cold," Chuuya huffs, already trying to wrestle out of it, but Dazai is, to one's surprise, one persistent bastard.

"The bandages keep me warm." He slaps Chuuya's hands away and readjusts the scarf. "You need it more than I do. And I don't want to be around cranky Chuuya."

"I'm not fucking cranky."

"Because now you're warm. You're welcome, by the way."

Chuuya rolls his eyes and kicks his shin before glancing around the scene, trying to find something to keep him entertained while they're waiting for Yosano to finish her call. He finds it not even three seconds later. "Look, there's a photo booth."

"Wow," Dazai deadpans, "we don't have these at home."

"You're so annoying," Chuuya mutters but grabs his wrist nonetheless, tugging him along. "I meant, let's go and take pictures. It will be like a printed memory from your first time in Paris."

"I will not fit into this thing," Dazai grumbles behind him.

"You're not that tall." However, Dazai is that tall, and his head bumps against the roof of the photo booth, making his spine curve.

"Well, fuck, just sit down," Chuuya says as he looks through the options, clearly not facing the same size problems.

Once he's picked out the 4x4 option, Chuuya turns back, trying to find

a place to squeeze himself into, but Dazai's faster, seizing his waist and pulling him onto his lap, close and tight.

"Dazai," Chuuya complains, "I was going to show them to my dads!"

"No one's going to see," Dazai murmurs, one hand skimming the length of his chest and pulling him even closer into his warmth. "You're so tiny. It will look like you're standing."

Chuuya turns to shoot him a *this isn't funny* glare but finds himself only inches from Dazai, so close he can smell the coffee he had earlier. Even a thousand similar moments later, he still isn't used to the way his stomach flips whenever he has Dazai in his space, so close it hurts a little bit because of the dizzying effect it has on him.

"Asshole," Chuuya breathes out, trying to stare him down and failing when his treacherous eyes flicker to Dazai's lips, full, curved into a sardonic half-smile, a bit chapped, and so, so perilously close.

His hand intuitively slides into Dazai's rich brown hair, gripping thick strands of it as he gives in to the pull in his breastbone and presses forward, brushing their mouths together, a bruised whimper in the back of his throat tearing out when Dazai sucks his bottom lip into his mouth until it buzzes; neither of them aware of the flashes that go off right in front of them.

Chuuya feels like his chest is exploding with things he wishes he could say but can't put into words — *thank you* and *I like you* and *you make my head spin* and *I can't imagine not seeing you ever again once October comes* and *I'm terrified* — so he doesn't. He just clings to Dazai and lets his body speak for itself, hoping that Dazai will somehow understand anyway.

Because he always does.

Their chests heave once they break apart, Chuuya resting his forehead against Dazai's for a few endless moments before Dazai breaks the tender silence between them. "So much about showing them to your dads."

"Please." Chuuya huffs, voice pitifully ruffled, and then clears his throat. "We'll just have to try again," he declares before attempting to flatten Dazai's now tousled hair, sticking up every which way because Chuuya likes to get handsy. Despite his best efforts, Dazai still looks criminally rumpled, mouth swollen, and eyes glazed, but it's the best Chuuya can do right now. "Do not ruin this again."

"*You* kissed me," Dazai points out as he gets up to pay for another round of photos.

Chuuya feels his neck flush with color because yeah. That one's on him. "I know."

This time they manage to get a few decent pictures together, Chuuya holding up a peace sign like the basic bitch he is (sometimes), and sticking out his tongue in the next one, on the verge of laughter because Dazai's hand is secretly tickling him.

These they can show to their families. The other ones, however...

The first picture shows Chuuya and Dazai simply staring at each other, maybe a second before they got distracted. The other three are pure, uncensored, making out photos. Even as he scowls at them, Chuuya can't help but admire their side profiles. They look hot kissing. He might have no idea what to do with his future, but, at least, he has *this* going for himself.

When Dazai gets a look at them, he clicks his tongue. "I'll send them out with my Christmas postcard next year."

Chuuya can't even laugh at the joke because even if he wanted to, Dazai wouldn't be able to do that. And it's unfair. How is a picture of two guys kissing considered wrong, but it's totally acceptable to be forced to date someone just because your father wants to secure a fucking business relationship?

"Don't," Chuuya says softly and pushes two of the pictures into Dazai's hand, splitting this memory in half and dividing it between the two of them. "Keep them safe instead."

Since it's Dazai and Yosano's last night here and their flight is scheduled for early morning, they decide to order food and stay in for the evening. Even his father joins later, bearings news that Arthur is doing slowly better and that, according to the doctors, he should be released within a week. Hopefully, this time without any more complications.

All it takes is one trip to the bathroom, and suddenly, a recording of one of Chuuya's ballet performances is running on the TV — a reenactment of *the firebird*, everyone's eyes glued to the screen. There's a reason why Chuuya had his fathers take down all of the pictures of his performances as well. He already has to live with the knowledge

that he'll never be able to feel that flutter in his stomach again when the lights dim and the crowd goes quiet. He didn't want to be reminded of that every time he went to the kitchen or back to his room. But even though seeing himself on the TV screen feels like a punch in the guts in slow-motion, Chuuya's able to breathe around the pressure. It's manageable.

"Wow," Chuuya says, not surprised to also see an album with pictures lying on the couch, "you guys aren't noisy at all."

"Guilty as charged," Yosano admits unabashedly, "but can you blame us? You were exceptional, darling."

Yeah, he *was*.

His father nods around a glass of wine. "I couldn't possibly deny them to watch you dance."

He ignores both of them in favor of casting a glance in Dazai's direction on the other side of the couch — something that most likely has to do with Baki not leaving Chuuya's side. Dazai's usually quick to notice someone staring, but right now, he doesn't even blink once as he stares at the TV.

Something in Chuuya twists so painstakingly that he has to dig his nails into his palms to keep himself from shattering apart right here and now.

He'd give away *everything* just to have someone look at him like that again. Like they're seeing magic happen in front of them. Like they're witnessing stars falling from the sky. He'd do everything to relive what it felt like to be worth *millions* one more time. Admiration wasn't the reason why he loved ballet so much, but he's human, and being able to feel good about himself was part of dancing. A great part.

When the orchestra finally plays the last note in the video, Chuuya lets out a breath, folding his arms over his chest. "Can we watch spider-man now?"

Admittedly, he does feel a little lonely on his side of the couch, not even being able to cuddle up with Dazai, let alone spend the entire movie making out because his father's present, but he does get to shower Baki with pets and kisses. Chuuya stretches out his limbs when they put the movie on pause for a snack and toilet break, and before he can even finish yawning, Paul and Dazai suddenly disappear in the kitchen. *Together*.

Dazai's good with his words, so he should be fine, but fuck, so is Paul.

Now that Chuuya thinks about it, they're both similar in a weird sort of way - and oh god, he does not want to think about that.

The news of his father waking up was so overwhelming that all thoughts of last night were pushed away by instant relief, but they totally fell asleep cuddling, and there's a 99% chance that Paul saw. And now they're *talking*. Chuuya prays to god it's not one of those *if you hurt my son, I will make you regret it* speeches because that would be so *wrong*.

Yosano must think the same thing because she shoots Chuuya a smirk and says, "I wonder what they're chatting about."

"Smart people stuff," Chuuya murmurs, mindful of the thin walls, "hopefully."

"I don't blame your dad. If I didn't know you, I'd take you two for a couple as well."

Baki arches her neck, and Chuuya indulges her in more scratches. "We talked about this. It's not like that."

"So you don't feel anything for him?" Yosano questions. "Nothing?"

Chuuya narrows his eyes. "Are you asking as *Dazai's* friend or as *mine*?"

"Both."

"Of course, I feel things." Before she can take that as some sort of confession of love, he continues, "but Dazai's more like a best friend to me." A best friend that he never had before. Chuuya had friends and acquaintances. He had a boyfriend. But he never had *this*.

"You fuck all of your best friends?"

"Jesus Christ, keep your voice down," Chuuya hisses, then scratches the side of his neck. "I have a high libido. And Dazai is good. It just works." Yosano looks at him like he's stupid, but thankfully, stays quiet. Because Chuuya's petty, he asks, "So what about you and Kouyou? Have you put a name to it yet?"

"Yes," Yosano says without missing a beat. "We've been officially together for a month now."

"What?!"

"Not everything has to be as complicated as you make it."

"You've got it backwards. We're trying to keep it *easy*. Because that's what relationships are. Complicated."

Yosano rolls her eyes. "If it's right, darling, then it isn't. And *you* are trying to keep it easy. Not Dazai."

When did a friendly conversation turn into an interrogation?

"What happened to being my friend?" Chuuya asks.

"I'm always going to be on Dazai's side first." She shrugs. "And I'm not going to apologize for that."

"Well," Chuuya snaps, "Dazai agreed to this just as much as I did, so I don't see what your problem is."

He never gets to hear her answer because a laugh echoes through the apartment — his father's laughter. It makes Chuuya frown. Dazai's not that funny.

"Looks like your dad likes Dazai well enough," he hears Yosano say. "Too bad it's not anything serious, huh?"

His father and Dazai choose that moment to come back, quietly chatting between themselves like Chuuya isn't even there.

Great.

He barely manages to pay attention to the rest of the movie, not when Yosano's words keep dancing through his brain.

Is it really so wrong to want something simple for once?

Everything else is already so messed up, and he just wants this one fucking thing for himself. This one thing.

Chuuya's the first to announce that he's heading to bed as soon as the credits start rolling, disappearing in the bathroom. He's even grouchy enough not to care where Dazai will sleep tonight. Seeing as he's such good friends with his dad now, he might as well sleep in *his* room! Chuuya forcefully brushes his teeth and half-laughs, half-glares at the reflection in the mirror before spitting out the paste. It's been a long day.

Although when he enters his room, Dazai's already there, sitting on his bed. It's a funny picture.

Dazai looks a little too big, too fancy to be on the shitty bed he's had since he turned fourteen. Like he was cut out of a fashion magazine and placed here, not belonging. If Chuuya wasn't annoyed right now, he'd laugh.

As it is, he stops a few feet in front of Dazai, crossing his arms.

"Is something wrong?" Dazai asks, even though the bastard is too good at reading people to actually need an answer.

"What did you and my dad talk about?"

"Stuff."

"Stuff?" Chuuya echoes. "What does stuff mean?"

The asshole shrugs. "The weather. My degree. Does it matter?"

"Yeah," Chuuya snaps. "He's my father, and you're —" He makes an indecipherable hand gesture, hoping that it will be enough.

Judging by the way Dazai cocks his head and raises his brow, it isn't. "I am what, Chuuya?"

"... my friend," he finishes lamely.

"Ah."

Chuuya's not going to have a repeat of the conversation he had earlier, so sighing, he just drops it, walking over to his closet to find something more comfortable to wear for the night. A moment later, there's a scratch at the door and a gentle woof.

"Can you open the door?" Chuuya asks. "Baki wants to come in."

Except that Dazai doesn't move.

He turns to shoots him a glower. "Hello?"

Dazai holds his stare. "Can she stay outside?"

Chuuya arches his brow.

"I don't get along with dogs."

"Yeah, I can see that," Chuuya mutters and walks over to open the door, but only to give Baki a few pets and gently push her in the other direction. "I'm so sorry, baby, not tonight," he tells her, hugging her to his chest. "I'm sure Yosano will be happy to give you cuddles, though, okay?" Baki gives him heart-wrenching puppy eyes, and Chuuya is barely strong enough to carry her to the living room before all but running back to his room.

"I'm sorry," Dazai says when the door falls shut.

And Chuuya immediately feels guilty as he sits down next to him. It's not like Dazai is to blame for his shitty mood right now. He didn't do anything wrong. "Don't be," Chuuya says and looks at him. "You don't like dogs, huh?"

Dazai lets out a low laugh. "No."

"Want to tell me what happened?"

"There's not much to tell. A stray dog once attacked me as a child, and now they can smell my fear. I have become their target."

Chuuya wants to smile but can't, more puzzled than anything. "Why would your family have Diabolo when you're scared of dogs?"

Dazai trails his index fingers across the mattress. "Because Ryuu wanted one."

Chuuya's chest falls.

Dazai's families didn't care. They just... ignored his fear and got a dog anyway.

Chuuya has never been good with words, so even if he tried, he wouldn't find the right ones, but what he can do is cup Dazai's cheek and stroke his thumb down his pale skin before tentatively leaning into a feather-light kiss, soft and slow.

It's not how they usually do this, yet still good in its own way.

Chuuya promised himself not to go there tonight. His father is a wall away, and it never stays at one kiss. It always becomes something deeper, more urgent, and —

Chuuya forcefully pulls himself away, gripping his pillow.

Dazai blinks slowly. "What was that for?"

"Can't I just kiss you?"

"No."

Chuuya bites his lip, fighting the urge to go right back in, press against Dazai until they're covered in each other — he squeezes his eyes shut and wiggles a few inches back. *What were they talking about it?* "Huh?"

Dazai's amusement is a little pale as he stands up. "I'll go brush my teeth."

Chuuya nods and crawls under the sheets, sliding his arm under his pillow and turning to his side. What they have is good, easy, perfect, he thinks. Why would he ever want to change that?

Chuuya's sleeping so deeply and adorably that Dazai wishes he could just let him rest for the time being. However, that would mean going back home without any goodbyes whatsoever, and Dazai's only so selfless.

Getting him to wake up at seven in the morning is a whole other ordeal, full of grumbled insults and sleepy sighs before Chuuya eventually all but falls out of bed. Compared to that, the rest of the morning flies by; the breakfast, the ride to the airport, and walking to the last possible point before they have to go their separate ways. For now.

Chuuya still looks grumpy and tired, a black beanie hiding half of his face, but he seems to sober up when Akiko places her hands on her hips with a nod. "All right, boys, I'm not going to torture myself and watch you two suck faces, so I'll leave you to it."

She gives Chuuya a brief hug. "We'll see you soon, right?"

"Yeah," Chuuya says and then waves her off.

Dazai narrows his eyes. Is he seeing things, or is there a tension between the two of them that hasn't been there before? He's been lucky so far to have both of them get along quite easily, despite their first wreck of a meeting, but maybe his luck is starting to run out. Bit by bit.

Once Akiko has disappeared behind the gates, he turns to Chuuya. "You are going to come back, right?"

Chuuya scoffs. "I wouldn't lie about that." He shoves his hands into the pockets of his navy blue bomber jacket. "Besides, I still have some unfinished business in Yokohama. I have to come back."

Dazai can't help it; he tugs at one loose and curly strand of Chuuya's hair, taking in the little scowl between his brows and bottling it, burying it inside his ribcage. "I'm never sure about Chuuya. He can be very surprising." A force of nature, if you will. A hurricane.

"Mm, it's what you like, though," Chuuya murmurs and then presses up on his toes, a wince passing over his features — so fleeting, Dazai nearly misses it. "Just fucking kiss me already, and then go. The plane won't wait for you."

Dazai smiles against his mouth, making sure to bite his lip for that comment, though judging by the little noise in the back of his throat, Chuuya enjoys that.

"We should have webcam sex while I'm still here," Chuuya murmurs into his mouth, staying there for a moment and sharing his air before pulling away, "or else, I'm going to die."

"Only if you put on the set you bought yesterday."

Chuuya smiles mischievously. "Why do you think I bought it?"

"I'll see you soon then," Dazai says and forces himself to walk, letting go of Chuuya, and eventually turning around completely.

It won't be long until they see each other again — two weeks, max — but even that time frame looms over his head like a gigantic, ominous sign telling him to figure something out before the two weeks turn into forever once September ends. Because their time *is* limited. And Dazai has leaned out too far by now, gravity pulling him down into an unfathomable, uncertain future.

The first thing that Akiko says when he finds her checking out the perfumes in the duty-free shop is, "you have to do something about this."

Oh, he knows.

Dazai knows.

Chapter End Notes

we're halfway there woooo

Chapter 16: Never Felt Longer

Chapter Notes

a short chapter but a necessary one :3

Being back in Paris, especially after Dazai and Yosano leave, leaves a strange taste in his mouth — his whole body, really. Chuuya's back home, sleeping in his own bed and talking to his family every day, not just via facetime, and yet he feels lonelier than he has in a long while. It's a lot like coming home after a good party and reminiscing about all the fun you had there.

His father is still in the hospital, and Chuuya's moping about missing Yokohama makes everything more that much more complicated, his longing to go back riddled with festering specks of guilt. Apparently, he's not even subtle about it because one afternoon, after they come home from the hospital — the last day before Arthur's release — his father says, "How about we book your ticket later?"

Chuuya bites his cheek, trying not to grin at the mere thought. "Really?"

"Son," Paul says with that look, "you still have your au pair year left to finish. You wouldn't want to quit halfway through, would you?"

"No..."

"Your father has been doing better. You clearly want to go back —" Chuuya cringes. Damn. "— and I don't see a reason to rob you of any more time there than necessary."

"You're not robbing me of anything, dad," he mutters. "This is and will always be my home."

So together, they sit down, and with Hayashi on the phone, they work out a convenient date for the flight back.

Six days.

Six days have never felt longer.

He texts Dazai every day; sometimes they call too when Chuuya feels even more bored and, frankly, needy than usual, and, well, by now,

he's so strung out that hearing Dazai murmur what he will do to him once he's back gets him hot enough to finish within minutes. One day, when he's doing groceries, he meets an old classmate, though her fucking smile when she asks him about his plans feels so condescending that Chuuya screams into his pillow after he comes home.

Needless to say, he can't wait to get back to Japan.

(And needless to say, Chuuya, for the love of him, can't imagine what the hell he will do with himself once his au pair year ends. Probably, get therapy.)

Arthur finally comes home, and the part of Chuuya that still feels guilty for wanting to go back relaxes, giving him some room to breathe with all these warring emotions inside him.

It's such a goddamn relief that Chuuya dances through his room that same day, quietly because his dads don't need to worry about this on top of everything else, but animatedly enough for the pain to make every step afterward hurt like a bitch

The thing about pain, though, is that it ironically grounds Chuuya.

It tells him that he's doing something, living, running, racing towards a distant future. It means he's not stuck but moving. So sometimes, when his ankle throbs, he pushes even harder.

He doesn't stop for one goddamn second.

The day before his flight back, the three of them eat dinner together, and Chuuya's more than familiar with the subtle shift in the atmosphere when his fathers exchange glances, then turn to him.

With a look. It's that look — the one they wore before Chuuya got to hear the talk for the first time, all the times they taught him about politics and social issues, or the day he came out as bisexual.

"So," Paul says from the sink where he's doing the dishes, "we wanted to have a little talk."

"No shit," Chuuya mutters, already having heard enough.

Maybe they saw him dancing? Is that it?

No, if they did, then Arthur wouldn't look so amused right now. "Your father thinks you'll emigrate to Japan," Paul casually says.

Chuuya's mouth parts.

Arthur shoots his husband a really? scowl before turning to Chuuya, folding his arms. "I mentioned the possibility of you thinking about it.

It's obviously the place you are from, and everything is new and wonderful and exciting, and young love always feels gigantic —"

"Huh?" Chuuya scowls.

First, he's puzzled, completely fucking clueless about what they're on about, and then — young love — oh god, they think that — "No," he says, shaking his head, "no, no, you've got it all wrong."

That makes Arthur stop, and he curiously tilts his head. "We do?"

"There isn't love or anything," Chuuya says. "I - I like my friends there and all, but that doesn't mean I want to move to Yokohama later."

"Chuuya," Paul says, "you don't have to lie to us."

"I'm not." He holds up his hands. "I swear."

"Honey, it's not that uncommon to get a crush on someone from your host family. That's what I read, at least. We get it. You and Dazai spend a lot of time together. Things happen."

"I'm not dating Dazai!" Chuuya snaps.

"You aren't?"

"No!"

Paul looks part disappointed, part amused as he dries off the plate in his hands. "Son, I saw you two."

Chuuya presses his eyes shut. This is ten times worse than the sex talk, he's sure. "That was —" He scratches his wrist. "I was upset and scared, okay? Friends hug, you know!" And he's really not about to tell his parents about all the mind-blowing but casual sex they have.

Neither of them looks 100% convinced by this.

"So you still plan to come home after the year ends?" Arthur asks. "No

eloping?"

Some of the tension in his spine melts away. Chuuya puffs out a huff of dry laughter. "Not that I planned to," he mutters, scrubbing a hand across his face. "You know what happened last time I was in a relationship. I don't..." He shakes his head. "I don't want that again."

"Well, Dazai does seem like a decent young man," Arthur says and makes a face. "I always thought something about Romaine felt off, but you were so in love, you would have started hating us if we said anything back then."

"I wouldn't have," Chuuya argues, but once he thinks about it, his conviction falters. Okay. Well, maybe he would have. Four years ago, his relationship with his dads was way less stable than it is now.

Arthur sighs with a little smile. "We want you to be happy, Chuuya.

That's our biggest wish for you, but we also want you to be careful."

"Yeah, of course. I know."

"So even if you do end up getting involved with Dazai —" He raises his hand before Chuuya can open his mouth to argue. "— I said if. With Dazai or anyone else, remember that one person isn't the world. Think about what you want first and foremost."

"Any other embarrassing things you want to mention while you're at it, or can I go now?"

"You can go."

"Thank god."

The flight back to Yokohama thankfully passes quickly and without any delays, probably because Chuuya accidentally sleeps through the entire thing, preparing for the awful feeling of being jetlagged yet again. Hayashi's supposed to pick him up, and no, Chuuya does not feel disappointed that Dazai didn't even offer to come to get him. No obligations, right? And Dazai's probably busy anyway.

It's totally fine.

It does make the whole business of getting off the plane and walking through the airport a lot more tedious and less exciting. Last time Hayashi found him pretty quickly after the baggage claim. This time,

however...

Chuuya's been spinning in circles trying to spot her in the mass of people, feeling a little like a lost child in the grocery store, when someone taps his shoulder. He turns, expecting to see his bubbly host mother but instead standing in front of him is —

"Dazai?"

Chuuya's too stunned for a moment to do anything but drink in the sight of him, feeling like he hasn't seen him in months instead of two measly weeks. Then Dazai smiles, and Chuuya throws himself around his neck, pressing his own grin into the soft material of his black coat.

Dazai's arms slide around his waist. "Missed you too, love."

Love?

"You asshole!" Chuuya pulls away and half-heartedly slaps his chest. "Why didn't you tell me you were coming?"

"There's this thing called a surprise."

"But Hayashi said —"

"I might have mentioned to her that I would be in the neighborhood anyway," Dazai says with a shrug before taking his bag. "I can also mention that your plane has been delayed." He mock-tsks. "These damn commercial flights."

They don't even make it out into the street before ending up pressed against each other in the car, Chuuya on his lap, slotting their mouths together over and over in near-bruising kisses as his hips roll down against Dazai. It will be a hassle to make himself look presentable later, but at that moment, Chuuya simply doesn't have the capacity to care.

Dazai drives his nails through his hair, and Chuuya sighs at the shivery scratch that crawls over his scalp, mouth parting in wordless invitation.

Then that hand pulls, not hard enough to hurt but enough to make him gasp and press closer. Dazai's chest rumbles with deep laughter, maybe not the best reaction but still sexy in a weird way before he tugs Chuuya away from him, even if it's just a few inches.

"You," Dazai tells him with a rasp, "are like a leech."

Chuuya's brows tug into a breathless frown. "Thanks?"

"I..." For a moment, Dazai simply looks at him, his expression not revealing anything other than mild amusement before he shakes his head and nods to the passenger seat. "As much as I'd love to continue this, I don't want you to get a fine for public indecency on your first day back."

"Fine." Reluctantly, Chuuya climbs off him and slides into the seat beside him, his lips still buzzing pleasantly. "You would get fined too, you know.

Is that not important?"

"Not as much," Dazai says as he smoothly pulls out of the parking lot and merges the car into traffic.

"Right."

Chuuya wonders how someone so smug is able to care so little about himself. An aggravating oxymoron.

Dazai asks about Arthur and how he's doing and listens to every little detail that bursts out of Chuuya even though it surely must bore him to death. They decide not to throw in a brief quickie, after all.

All it would take is one look at the airport's online site for Hayashi to know it's a lie — in all honesty, Chuuya would still take that risk, but there is a certain... anticipation in waiting a little longer. It's a bit like edging, except that being denied an orgasm, Chuuya's being denied Dazai's cock.

Out of pure habit, Chuuya almost leans over and kisses him goodbye when they're in front of the house. Just in time, he remembers where they are. "Uh, see you tomorrow?" he asks instead, hoping it sounds smoother than it feels.

It's already too late to pretend to go anywhere, and he'll survive one more night of not being fucked out to his wit's end — probably — but anything more than that will be a challenge.

"Tomorrow."

Dazai flicks his nose, making him huff and roll his eyes before he gets

out of the car.

Tomorrow.

Chuuya can't wait.

Throughout the last few months, they have slid into such a comfortable routine with each other that usually, Chuuya doesn't even think twice about everything that involves having sex with Dazai.

Don't get him wrong, he still dresses up in pretty things because looking into the mirror and seeing someone smoking hot and handsome in it makes Chuuya happy. And because having Dazai devour him with his eyes isn't too bad either. So it's not like Chuuya shows up at his penthouse with crumbs on his shirt every time. But... even he has lazy days and being able to get railed when his hair is a little greasy and the circles under his eyes dark without worrying that it will put off Dazai is nice.

Tonight, though... tonight, his stomach is fluttering with nerves and anticipation, so Chuuya goes all out when he gets ready for the dick appointment of all dick appointments. He cleans, moisturizes, and oils his skin until it's as soft as a baby's butt. He uses his favorite shampoo, one that makes his hair smell like cherry blossoms and citrus flowers. He does a few squats. He dances through his room in underwear while blasting Beyonce's Halo. Hair still wet from the shower, Chuuya considers the clothing options he laid out on his bed earlier.

He grabs a shirt, a revealing lacy top, and holds it in front of his chest, eyeing himself in the mirror with a frown when his phone goes off. Chuuya accepts it without having to look at the caller ID — a few weeks ago, before Paris and before his father got sick, Dazai changed his ringtone for himself to sexy bitch. Considering Chuuya rarely ever has his phone unmuted anyway, he didn't bother to change it.

He only regrets it a little.

"Hey," Chuuya greets him. "Black or red? Choose one."

"Black."

He hums. Good ch—

"Chuuya," Dazai says, "I won't make it today."

Chuuya's happy humming stops, and slowly he lowers the top, dangling between his fingers. "Oh. Did something happen?"

"My father happened." Dazai's voice sounds tired, and even though there's a cold flare of disappointment in Chuuya's stomach, the concern overshadows it. "He decided it's time for me to start representing the company, so I'm going on a spontaneous business trip to Ibaraki. I can't say no." Because Dazai took off to Paris without permission. Because of Chuuya. "I'm sorry. If I had known —"

"Don't," Chuuya hurries to say, shoving the clothes back into his closet. "It's not your fault. I get it."

"I'll make it up to you when I'm back."

Chuuya allows himself to smile as he flops down on his bed, not caring anymore that his hair will get flat and ugly. "For how long? Do you know?"

"Eight days."

Man, they just saw each other after two agonizingly long weeks. This sucks.

"Well," Chuuya tries to say with more enthusiasm than he feels, "more webcam sex? We're good at that by now."

Dazai's laugh is brittle and quiet. "I guess we are. I have to go now. The jet is waiting, but I'll shoot you a text when I land."

"Okay," Chuuya says. "Good luck, and have a safe flight."

"Thanks, love."

When the line goes silent, Chuuya squeezes his eyes shut and presses his hands against his face, a sigh leaving his body. So much about the hot, long-awaited sex today — or the whole week. It's starting to look a lot more like a movie, junk food, and his own hand.

Chapter 17: Plans

Chapter Notes

Content warnings:
- explicit sexual content
- mentioned drug use
- non-consensual drug use/roofying (towards the end of the chapter)

Please stay safe ＜3

"— obviously didn't work."

Skimming the message on his screen, Chuuya tries his best not to grin like an idiot.

"Chuuya?

“....”

“Chuuya, are you even listening to me?"

He starts typing his reply, but that's when, out of nowhere, his phone gets confiscated, and Chuuya's met with Kouyou's indignant glare. "What is so important you can't even —"

"You really shouldn't read that —"

Her eyes fall to the screen, doing precisely what he said *not* to do, and — "Oh my god," she snaps, a painful wince passing over her face. "Gross! I did not need to see that! Ever!"

Stealing back his phone, Chuuya makes a face. "I told you not to read it,” he says and shrugs before returning his gaze to his screen. Where was he? Ah, *opening his mouth wide.* Right.

"Can you stop sexting Dazai while you're at the hairdresser with me?"

Continuing to type, Chuuya shoots her a half-assed apologetic smile. "I'm sorry. It's just that every time I'm free, he is busy, and every time I don't, he is free, and I —" His fingers pause so he can clench them into fists, eyes squeezing shut. "I am dying. I am bursting. I am —"

"You're horny," Kouyou cuts in with a wave of her hand. "I got it the

first time around. Thanks."

Again, Chuuya winces. Usually, he at least pretends to keep his shit together in front of her because Kouyou has become something like a big sister to him, but desperate times call for desperate measures, and right now, Chuuya's too frustrated and wound tight to filter his thoughts, let alone words. "Sorry."

Flipping her long hair behind her back, Kouyou shakes her head. "I'm surprised Dazai even takes that job seriously."

It's not like his father gives him much of a choice.

"Well, he's trying. And he's good at it."

"You should have seen the Dazai I knew in school."

It piques Chuuya's interest enough to tear his eyes away from his phone. "What was he like?"

"A ticking time bomb," Kouyou mutters. "He went to every party there was, got drunk, or worse. He had a thing for antagonizing people for his own amusement. And..." She puffs out a vexed breath, folding her hands together. "... even though I knew their relationship was fake, I couldn't stand seeing him hook up with someone else when Akiko was in the other room. It was disrespectful."

"And because you liked her."

The glare she throws him makes him shut up.

"Dazai was a bastard." Kouyou juts out her chin. "He had this special way of seeing inside you, figuring out what you want, and then taking his sweet time turning it into dust. For a long time, I was convinced he was the fucking devil."

Wow.

Chuuya's no stranger to Dazai being an ass; he experienced that first hand in their first few weeks knowing each other, but he wouldn't go as far as calling him *the devi*l. Aggravating, sure. Too smart for his own good, yeah. But not this. If anything, Chuuya would think of him as kind. Good. The things Dazai has done for him...

"So what," Chuuya can't help but ask, "you hate him but still spend every week having lunch with him? Just because of Yosano?"

"No," she says, "because he was all that. Now..." Chuuya watches her muse over her words. "I wouldn't call him *changed*, but he does put more effort into his actions. Into his life. The Dazai I knew was hellbent on self-destruction and didn't care who became collateral damage. This Dazai does."

Huh.

All of Dazai's *"are you okay?"* flash through Chuuya's head. All the times Dazai made him laugh and forget about his worries for a moment. All the times Dazai knew exactly what food he would like when they ordered. Because he *remembers*. Dazai booking tickets to Paris without even a second of hesitation. Dazai holding him and helping him fall asleep. It doesn't sound like the guy Kouyou described.

When Chuuya doesn't say anything, Kouyou lifts one shoulder in a one-sided shrug. "Perhaps he grew up."

Chuuya has more questions, a thousand of them, but before he utters them, the hairdresser appears, profusely apologizing for keeping them waiting, and he doubts that Dazai's antics are appropriate conversation material.

Dazai didn't think his week could become much worse. Then, earlier today, he had the misfortune to run into Nobuko in the lobby of the hotel he's staying at.

What a funny coincidence.

At least, she seemed just as surprised, and therefore didn't have much to say to him aside from an "oh" and "hello, Dazai." Considering he still has two nights left here, that might change.

After several hours out and about, he finally enters his room, letting himself linger against the door, chest rising and falling heavily. Sometimes he wonders how one can be so good at talking to people yet incredibly tired of it. His bones feel heavy, dragging him down. The smile he has worn for the past hours cuts through his skin and hollows him out, leeching away everything warm.

The only motivation to move through the fog in his mind and the impending party tonight is the little video date with Chuuya and the fact that Dazai has *plans*.

For himself. For the rest of his life — because the thought of working under his father for the next years, centuries, even, makes him crave the sharp, stinging pain of a razor blade. Plans for Chuuya and him.

His laptop is already on his bed, and two minutes and a text later, Dazai's screen goes from black to Chuuya's face, pixelated but nonetheless gorgeous, his hair in a high ponytail, waving around as he grins into the camera.

"Hey there, stranger," Chuuya says. "Long time no see."

Dazai's eyes flicker to the time in the bottom right corner. "Exactly twenty-six hours."

"See, *long*." Somewhere outside the screen, Chuuya grabs a handful of chips, stuffing them into his mouth. "Are you done for tonight?"

There's a hopeful glint in his eyes that finally they might have time for something more than a thirty-minute call or sending each other dirty texts while they're both busy. Dazai's fingers clench when he shakes his head. "Sorry, love. Shibusawa-san invited me to a club."

"A club," Chuuya echoes, clearly trying to stifle the disappointment in his voice. "That sounds fun."

"It's just business."

"Hey, I don't mind. Maybe, for once, you can be the one sending me drunk voice notes."

Dazai doubts that will ever happen. Alcohol and his medication don't mix well together. At home, he can push his limits, but he's not going to do here with a bunch of strangers who see him as an entrance ticket to his father's empire.

"Sure," he lies. "Maybe."

Chuuya pops another chip in his mouth, pulling one knee up to his chest. It's bare, which means he's either wearing the booty shorts that he likes to show off now and then or...

"Would you do me and favor and switch off the main light in your room?" Dazai asks.

Chuuya's eyes narrow knowingly. "Why."

"Oversaturation."

"Fine." Chuuya stands up, and sure enough, Dazai's suspicions are confirmed as he's granted a splendid view of Chuuya's bare thighs under the shirt he's wearing. One particular step lets it ride up, and gods above, that ass should be criminal.

Dazai hopes he didn't forget to lock his door.

"Satisfied?" Chuuya asks once he's back.

"Not quite." Dazai nudges his head towards the screen. "Shirt off."

Chuuya lets out an annoyed huff even as his arms already cross, fingers gripping the edge of his shirt before pulling it over his head and carelessly tossing it away. "Since when do you run the show?"

"Do you want me to stop?"

Chuuya raises his chin. "No."

It's why Dazai will never get enough of this, of him. Chuuya is lightning and thunder, boundless, a force of nature in everything he does, so feeling Chuuya bend for him and *enjoying* it, makes their relationship that much more satisfying.

"Hands-on your chest," Dazai instructs. "Play with yourself."

Chuuya's throat bobs as he swallows and obeys, eyes fluttering when he rubs the pad of his fingers against his nipples, making them nice and hard, before tweaking and pinching them. His lips press together to contain what must be a moan.

Dazai nods, his own hand rubbing over the growing bulge trapped in his slacks. "Just like that."

"What about you?" Chuuya asks, a little breathlessly.

"What about me?"

"Aren't you going to lose all those fucking layers?"

"I'm content just the way I am right now."

"But I want to see you."

Dazai's mouth curves into a smile. "Focus on yourself, Chuuya. Don't stop until your chest is sore."

"Jerk," Chuuya growls, but his skin flushes with rosy colors as he rolls his nipple between his fingers over and over again, switching between them and letting out tiny, choked breaths.

"Do they hurt?" Dazai asks.

"A little."

"Like if I was there?"

Chuuya shakes his head in frustration. "No."

"Then you know what to do."

Chuuya lasts about a minute before his pleading eyes zero in on Dazai through the screen. "They're sore, okay? They're sore, Dazai. Please —"

"Roll back until I can see all of you." Dazai supposes there is a certain perverse mystery in not seeing all of someone when things are left up to the imagination, but this is not the case here. Not with Chuuya. No fantasy or dream could even come close to the sight that he makes when he slides his chair back until he's in full view, his cock full and hard and straining against his belly.

"Beautiful," Dazai murmurs, the blood in his veins heating as he watches Chuuya dig his nails into his skin in order to stay put.

"Dazai —"

"I want us to come together."

The heated glower on Chuuya's face dissipates into something zealous and rhapsodic, his eyes growing huge and dark on the other side of the screen as he breathes out a, "okay."

Refusing to tear his eyes away from that bewildering sight, Dazai undoes his belt and wrenches down both his slacks and briefs, just low enough to be able to grip his cock, stroking himself slowly while his free hand reaches for the traveled-size bottle of lube he brought along.

"Let me see," Chuuya demands, his tone bordering a pitiful plea. "I want to see, too."

The laptop webcam only covers Dazai up to his mid-frame, so everything below... Chuuya can't see. Dazai could tilt his laptop, but where would be the fun in that?

"Patience, love." He does decide to take some sort of mercy, so Dazai nods towards him. "You can touch yourself. Just like I would, okay?"

Nodding furiously, Chuuya's slick hand slides up and wraps around his cock, eyes fluttering shut as his fist moves from top to bottom at a maddeningly slow pace because that's what Dazai would do if he was there. Chuuya's listening, being good, so good for him even though it would be easy not to. Just thinking about it makes Dazai's dick twitch.

Slowly, with each thorough stroke, thumb rubbing the slick head of his cock, Chuuya's fist speeds up. Dazai matches his pace. The pressure inside his stomach, thick and warm and heady, mounts.

This is so much better than getting off alone. Everything is so much better with Chuuya there; everything so much more bearable and colorful, simply because of this one human being.

Chuuya's breath hitches at the same time as Dazai's, their heartbeats synchronizing even though they're thousands of miles away from each other. Always.

As wonderful as it is to watch Chuuya work his hand around his cock, faster and faster, what does Dazai in is his face, so alive and full of raw, honest emotions. No matter what or where or why, Chuuya always gives all of himself to the cause. His eyes are half-lidded and trembling as he violently tries to keep them open on Dazai, mouth parted around silent, breathless, moans, back arched, hips bucking up into his own fist as if it was actually Dazai on the other side touching him. As if they were actually together.

"I — I'm close." His broken voice is the most beautiful thing Dazai's ever heard. "Please—"

Dazai tilts the laptop camera down, granting him a view of what he's doing, his hand trembling with the fire building inside his veins as he strokes himself.

"*Oh my god —*"

Dazai tilts it back up, arm quickening, and at the same time as Chuuya's head tosses back, muscles going taut, Dazai feels his lungs stutter with the intensity of the orgasm that rips through him. On the screen, Chuuya jerks himself through his high, streaks of come landing first on his chest, then his lower belly with a few final strokes.

What Dazai would give to be there right now, clean him up and kiss

him raw. Worlds. He'd give up worlds and empires.

"Wow," Chuuya breathes out, his arm looking a little wobbly as he scratches a spot next to his eye. "Who knew a handjob could be so exciting."

Grabbing napkins from his nightstand, Dazai lets out a puff of breath. "You weren't wrong when you said we're getting good at this."

Chuuya offers him a blinding grin before he bends down, disappearing from view. "I'm still dying for the real thing."

"Trust me, love. I know."

"Is this a post-sex thing now, too?" Chuuya shows back up on the screen, brows arched.

"What thing?"

"The *love* thing."

"It never was only a sex thing."

Dazai watches him closely, waiting for — for something, but as it often is the case with Chuuya, he dismisses it with a puzzled shrug and a "okay." It seems like Dazai has somehow fallen for an idiot.

But it's his idiot, and he couldn't give up on it even if he wanted to.

They talk as Chuuya cleans up and gets dressed, about the club Dazai's going to, about work, about Chuuya's adventures on the playground with Ryuu and Gin, about his trimmed hair.

And Dazai craves to do this for the rest of the night. Talk about everything. About nothing.

How something so mundane is able to make Dazai feel so utterly sick with longing, will never make sense to him. Then again, everything that involves Chuuya and Dazai's feelings for him is beyond any rational logic.

They say their goodbyes when someone knocks on Chuuya's door — Ryuu, he informs Dazai later via text.

Dazai still has some time to kill before he's supposed to meet Shibusawa, so he opens a file on his computer, one that was created on the flight back from Paris. His father is not only powerful but also

brilliant, which means that one favor would turn into two and ultimately into ten because he would always find something wrong in his son and turn it around until he could take and take and take. It's something Dazai would do.

It's efficient. Clever.

But there's only so much a person can give. Dazai won't work under Gen'emon for the rest of his life; he can't. And so, as he was sitting on the plane, watching the place where Chuuya remained and the place he would eventually return to get smaller and smaller, a plan started forming in his head.

Gen'emon doesn't want Dazai to become the face of his company someday. No. In fact, there's a high chance his father actually despises the idea. No, what he wants above all is a son he doesn't have to be ashamed of. A son that accomplished something. And even though, Dazai admittedly lost a good portion of his youth wasting away at the bottom of a colorless, rotten well... he still has time left. Perhaps his father will never be proud of him, the train for that having long passed already, but maybe, he can at least one day think of him as something more than a waste of life.

And Dazai doesn't have to work in Gen'emon's company for that — not forever, at least.

He just has to present his own game plan for a thriving career and success and money. His own business proposal.

So, as the clock on the wall of his hotel room ticks away, Dazai calculates numbers, does research, puts his thoughts into words, and, for once in his life, he *hopes*. It's a dreadful, pulsating thing that trickles into his system like a drug and fills him with silly fantasies, but god, do they taste good.

All Dazai has to do is get through this trip. All he has to do is get home and refine his proposal until he can present it to his father, his own kingdom. And then, Dazai can have it all. Perhaps he could even be free someday.

Throughout the last few days, the task Dazai was sent here for seemed mundane enough. Play nice with the airline representative the board has been partnering with, talk about numbers and products, and summarize everything that was already known to each party but in fancy, convincing words. Dazai's a pro at that. Easy.

Except that it seemed so simple, it blinded Dazai, and the fact that Shibusawa was here with a completely different agenda flew right past Dazai's head.

It starts with a complete change of demeanor, Shibusawa going from a collected, almost boring sales representative to the recklessly smug daredevil that offers him a line of coke in the bathroom. But what ultimately gives him away is that Nobuko shows up not much later, some guy with abnormally greasy hair in tow.

And the smirk on her face screams trouble.

She plops down in their lounge as if it belongs to her. Dazai takes a sip of his drink. "Should have known you'd come running at the mere mention of powder."

"Seems like I'm not the only one who came, though," she retorts with a shrug. "You're here."

And Dazai politely *declined* the line.

He has done coke before, but that was years ago during a time where he just wanted to disappear into the sun. Now ruining himself and the reputation of the representative his father chose doesn't fit into his plans anymore. Not that he voices any of these arguments. It's both easier and more amusing to keep Nobuko thinking otherwise.

"Not for much longer," Dazai says and makes a show of looking around his surroundings with a look of distaste. "This scene is boring me to death."

Nobuko lets out a shrill, fake laugh, making her look stupid even when swathed in neon lights. "You're that scared? I wouldn't have taken you for a coward." Then she gets to her feet, balancing herself on the shoulder of the guy next to her. "Thanks, Dostoevsky-san. Anyways, don't be scared, Dazai. I'm just here to have fun and dance with Shibusawa since he's the only one here who understands what the word means."

"That is my cue," Shibusawa chimes in, nodding along to the rhythmic beat booming over the speakers, "to get up and dance." *Dance*. The look Shibusawa sends him in passing is one that screams that whatever has been happening tonight is only the tip of the iceberg.

Dazai indulges himself in the fantasy of imagining them snorting a tiny bit too much into their ape brains, just enough to pass out and for

cops to storm the club.

It does give him the best chance to leave this shithole before he gets dragged into, though, and Dazai moves to do th —

"Oh, you're not actually going to leave, are you?" the guy — Dostoevsky asks, tilting his head lazily. "How rude." The gleam in his eyes says he knows too much, says he doesn't care what will happen to him. Dazai looks at him and sees a greasier, ganglier version of his past self.

"Sorry, was I supposed to make conversation with local cryptid first? My mistake." Dazai gets to his feet, dusting off his pants. "I'll remember it next time."

Dostoevsky twists his drink between his fingers, wearing that I know something that you don't smile. "And here I was about to tell you why Shibusawa is acting off."

It doesn't make Dazai rock to a halt — because he wasn't moving yet, but it does make him glance down at the guy. He's a virtual stranger, brought along by someone as irrelevant to the partnership deal as Nobuko. Now, why would he even have the slightest idea about any of this?

"Let me guess," Dazai says. "The deal will fall through?"

Dostoevsky's smile gains an edge of amusement. "So they weren't lying. You *are* sharp."

Dazai pushes away the first concern that arises — whether he is actually to blame for this or not, coming back from a business trip with a botched deal that was 99,9% secured before won't look good in front of the company. Instead, he meets Dostoevsky's stare. "And I'm not the only one, it seems," he replies.

All of these things can be dealt with later. He takes his glass and takes a sip, stalling for time and —

Dazai's pulse thunders in his ears as a strange, salty flavor washes over his mouth. He only swallows what's necessary, spitting out the rest as quickly and carefully as possible before placing the glass back on the table.

Why in the world did he even take off his eyes of it in the first place?

"The airline wasn't planning to sign for months anyway," Dostoevsky provides. "They just needed a valid, legal reason to back out of it."

Hence the drugs.

They wanted to feed them to Dazai, then make a scandal out of it. Considering his school reputation, it's not a bad idea — except that things since then have clearly changed.

And Dazai just... he didn't expect them to try to *roofie* him.

His bones grow cold at the mere idea, making Dazai's feet move before his brain can even react. It doesn't matter why the deal fell through. It doesn't matter why this Dostoevsky guy is here, attempting to drug him. None of this matters. Dazai just needs to get out. His lungs feel tight, so tight he can barely breathe around them —

He needs to get out.

His surroundings whizz past him in a loud, fuzzy blur. Whether it's because that sip of his drink was enough — was it even one, or did Dazai simply not notice it before? — or whether it's because his feet are moving at a dizzying speed, he doesn't know.

What he does know is that the air feels good, cold, and harsh, but finally clearing some of that space in his lungs. What he also knows is that he's leaning against some dirty wall, taking sobbing breaths, and desperately clinging to the phone that's he's pressing against his ear with a bruising force.

"Hmm 'hello?"

The built-up air softly rushes out of his mouth. "Hey..."

"Dazawhhh—" It sounds like Chuuya yawns. "— ai? Is that you?"

"Yeah. Did I wake you?"

"Kind of," his sleepy voice mumbles, "but's fine. You okay?"

"Yeah. I just need..." to hear something, anything not to fall apart right now. "...something to help me fall asleep."

He's in the middle of the city in a dirty alley wall, one that a thousand clubbing goers probably used as a pissing spot judging by the smell. But right now, his legs feel paralyzed, rooted to the ground. He should be running, trying to get away as far away as humanly possible from

this place, from these people, but Dazai's legs are wobbly, trembling violently, and the only thing that keeps them from buckling is the oblivious person on the other end of the line.

He hears Chuuya yawn again, then shift loudly before replying. "Thought you were out?" Then there's a surprised gasp. "'s this your drunk booty call?!"

No.

"You can call it that," Dazai murmurs, pressing his forehead against the cold wall.

"Are you in your bed?"

"No."

"In your bathroom?"

"I'm not in the hotel yet, chibi."

Chuuya lets out another muffled gasp. "You're still partying? 's surprisingly quiet."

Dazai finally pushes away from the wall, heart in his throat as he takes a careful look around. "I'm on my way home how."

To his relief, the main street is more crowded, a dozen groups of people huddled together, some just about to enter, others only outside for a smoke.

"Call your driver," Chuuya tells him.

Out of all the days, Dazai stupidly decided to give his driver a night off today, but maybe if he's lucky, he might still reach him with a call.

Dazai slumps against a street light, muscles still tense and shaking, his brain still providing him with one scenario of what could have happened after another, reminding him that even though he might get away unscathed tonight, there will be consequences to be carried. And yet, even though exhaustion is trying to drag him down, Dazai stands.

He still stands.

Dazai's one of the lucky people that rarely has to deal with hangovers, but the next morning that lucks runs out and leaves him high and dry

over the toilet in his hotel bathroom.

Last night, after getting a hold of his driver, he got home in one piece. Aside from a searing headache, Dazai felt fine, lucid, and even fell asleep faster than usual. Why his stomach decides to rebel now escapes him, but thanks to the intensity of the cramps and nausea, Dazai doesn't really have enough thoughts left to even wonder.

Technically, he still has a day left. Technically, he's supposed to report only good news to his father when he's home. Technically, he should have stayed and turned the situation yesterday. The lingering knowledge that this might sabotage everything makes his bile taste that

much more bitter.

For the longest time, his father called him a failure, a disappointment, an utter disgrace to their name, what with the teenage rebellions and all the desperately childish cries for attention when he was younger. Dazai always believed those were the words of a man who lost his wife and was left with an unstable child in return. Sitting on the floor, his body trembling and sweating, it strikes him that all this time, his father might have just been telling the truth.

Chapter 18: This Is How It Starts...

Chapter Notes

Content Warnings:
- explicit sexual content in the beginning of the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Fuck, *please*."

If there is one word in bed that always spurs Dazai on, it's this one. *Please*. Especially from someone like Chuuya, who, on principle, doesn't beg, not ever, except... here. Except now. With him.

Chest falling and rising heavily with the control it takes to not snap his hips forward, Dazai leans down, draping himself over Chuuya's body as he places a kiss on Chuuya's spine. "Please what?"

"Move," Chuuya growls, a stark contrast to the way his muscles shudder tenderly under Dazai's lips. "Move and fuck me or — or just do something, or I'll do it myself!" It's not an empty threat either — it never is with him. Chuuya thrusts his hips backwards with a low hiss in an attempt to fuck himself back on Dazai's cock.

Dazai quickly puts a stop to that by pressing down on Chuuya's back until his body, aside from his beautiful hips, is pinned to the mattress, rendering him useless. "Either you take what I give you, or you get nothing at all."

"I wouldn't have to take anything if you just fucking got to w—"

"You already came on my fingers," Dazai helps him remember. "Where's the gratitude?"

Knowing he will get something bratty bordering on mean in return, Dazai chooses that moment to pull out of Chuuya and slam back in, making Chuuya's reply trail off into a muffled gasp, his back arching like a bow under him. "*Fuck you.* Do that again."

"You would be amazed at how much you could get from me if you simply were a little nicer once in a while." Dazai's hand slides up the length of his spine until they reach his throat, letting his fingertips circle the tender flash as his hips thrust forward again. Chuuya's muscles flutter under him. "I would spoil you rotten."

"As if you —" Chuuya gasps. "— want that."

Dazai huffs out a tender laugh against him. He's not wrong. The very appeal is and has always been his storm of a personality; he'll snap and yell and rage, yet he will still melt under Dazai like liquid. Like he was made for this, for the two of them. It's fascinating, addicting, and it's such a divine sight that Dazai would trade in his last dying breathe just to experience it over and over again. "You know me so well, my love."

And for that, Chuuya will get everything that he wants.

Wrapping an arm around his stomach, Dazai pulls him up to his knees and back into him and down on his cock. Chuuya's head tosses back, his entire body thrashing violently as Dazai doesn't even give him a second to adjust before pushing his cock into him, deep. The other hand holds onto Chuuya's throat, controlling his position from there and tugging on his choker now and then.

"Please," Chuuya's cry has gained a new note of desperation, and it drives Dazai into quickening his pace, hips pistoning up into him in rapid-fire succession, "please, please, please, I need to — need to come; *please* —"

Wrenching Chuuya's head forward, Dazai captures his lips, dying to drink up all these pleas and noises and feel them melt on his tongue. The kiss is more teeth and slick, maddening urgency than actual kissing, especially as he finally gives Chuuya what he wants and wraps his fingers around his cock, making him squeeze and spasm from the overwhelming shock of sensations. It's like this that Chuuya's muscles clench up before a series of contractions wreck him, his fist filling with hot come; Dazai savoring the syrupy-sweet taste of Chuuya's delirious moans when he sucks them off his wet lips.

Dazai's rhythm starts dissolving into periodic, little jerks as he pushes Chuuya down again and chases his own orgasm, breathing into Chuuya's neck while riding out his high until the very last drop. When Dazai finally feels his orgasm rip through him, his vision blisses out for a few magnificent seconds. Then his muscles all but melt into liquid mush, and Dazai lets out a heavy breath, resting his forehead against Chuuya’s sweaty shoulder.

The lull of the afterglow fizzles out when he feels Chuuya twitch around him again. Dazai lets out a soft laugh against his skin. “Still not satisfied?”

“Shut up,” Chuuya murmurs, voice muffled against the bedsheets. “My body is making up for the last few weeks.”

“Then let’s count how many times I can make you come before greedy chibi finally feels full.”

Chuuya nods eagerly and doesn't even complain when Dazai manhandles him, pushing him down on his back before pulling out and replacing his cock with three fingers, eliciting a whimpering breath from him.

Dazai slants his chest against him, pinning him a little under his weight as he places soft, brief kisses all over his neck and jaw as he works him into another shivery, light orgasm. "That's it," Dazai murmurs into his ear. “Number three. That enough for you?"

Chuuya breathes heavily, muscles jumping, but when Dazai’s fingers pause, he clenches around him again, wrapping his legs and arms around his body. "No," he shakes his head repeatedly, completely lost in pleasure, "another one! *Please*, Dazai."

Having expected that, Dazai is quick to react. With one arm, he pushes both of Chuuya’s thighs against his stomach so that the pace of his fingers hits his prostate every time. They have done this so many times by now that Dazai has making Chuuya come down to a fine art, knowing exactly where to push and how fast. It takes less than a few minutes to have his muscles spasming around him again, even if Chuuya’s fervent grip in Dazai’s hair never eases.

And so Dazai continues, doesn’t stop until he finally feels Chuuya’s body grow lax under him, all the tension seeping out with the last orgasm Dazai wrangles out of him — which is either the sixth one or a fifth one that never really stopped.

Dazai is careful and gentle with him when he stretches out Chuuya’s poor legs again before he crawls over him, stroking his feverishly hot cheek with the hand that’s clean. Chuuya looks entirely out of it but in a good way, making a small, content noise in the back of his throat when Dazai presses lingering kisses all over his face that tug at Dazai’s heartstrings like tiny fists.

In hindsight, he does wish they could have at least discussed something like subspace before — they did whenever they tried out other kinks; it is a pretty personal and intimate experience, but Dazai is also aware that Chuuya’s always been prone to gorging on pleasure, so him dropping shouldn’t come as that big of a surprise.

Dazai spends the next ten minutes keeping Chuuya warm and happy with snuggles and kisses before Chuuya eventually blinks sluggishly, burying his face in his chest, and Dazai uses the moment to force him to drink some water.

“Sorry,” Chuuya finally mumbles. “‘m a little greedy…”

Dazai fights a chuckle and instead kisses his sweaty forehead. "You got carried away. It happens." Chuuya nods, but he's still shaking a little. "Let's run you a bath," Dazai suggests softly before sliding his hands under his waist and somehow managing to get to his feet — barely avoiding wobbling. Chuuya wordlessly rests his head on his shoulder.

While Dazai lets the water in, he places him on the edge of the bathtub before grabbing a towel, dabbing it with some water, and turning back to Chuuya, who looks like he could fall asleep at any given moment.

"How do you feel?" Kneeling down, he places one hand on the outside of his thigh, the other gently cleaning the dried come off his stomach and chest.

"Tired."

"You can sleep here."

"I have to get back..."

"I can drive you in the morning." It will be a bitch to wake him up in the first place, but worth the pain if it means he can make sure that right now, Chuuya will be fine. "Or, call Hayashi and say you caught a cold on the plane. We wouldn't want to infect the kids, right?"

Chuuya huffs out a soft laugh with an underlying shiver when Dazai cleans between his legs, his grip around the edge turning white-knuckled for a second.

Dazai's confident in his ability to fuck someone out, but Chuuya... he seems to be on an entirely different caliber when it comes to sexual appetite.

"I've only been back for a week," he hears Chuuya reply. "I can't just bail whenever I want when I don't feel good."

Dazai sighs as he gets up and turns off the water faucet. Chuuya's a bit more lucid, slipping into the warm water with a hiss before he turns

his ever so demanding look — with a hint of haziness — on Dazai, nudging his head into the tub.

Dazai climbs in and settles behind him, pulling him close to his chest until he feels Chuuya's taut muscles slowly melt, sinking deeper into the water.

"You should still stay."

"Whatever," Chuuya mumbles. "If you want the responsibility of waking me up, go ahead. Suit yourself."

Little does he know, Dazai wants all of it.

But is it that surprising? He's not an expert on relationships, having been in exactly zero before, but Dazai's positive that what they've been doing for the past months — that the bare intimacy they share, the kisses that aren't just about sex, the conversations, and all of this, are what relationships look like as well.

Chuuya's scared. Last time, he got hurt. Dazai understands the notion behind it, but he wouldn't be still here if there wasn't something more behind the two of them.

Sure, Dazai might not be an easy person to love, and perhaps, like everyone else, Chuuya never will, but Dazai thinks he can live without it as long as he gets to have this. He never pushed Chuuya any further because he thought he would be satisfied with their little thing, but now that they're already a few days into March, the end of their time comes closer and closer every day.

Dazai doesn't want an end. He can't have that.

All he has to do is show Chuuya that this beautiful thing they could be is so much more gorgeous than the ugly thing he fears they will become. Manageable, right?

When Chuuya wakes up, it's still dark outside, and a half-lidded glance at his phone reveals that it's around three in the morning. The spot next to him is empty, which is strange considering Dazai said he'd come to bed not much later. And given that Chuuya broke his rule of never staying over — because Dazai tired him out so much that he all but dozed away in the bathtub afterwards — and given he will have to wake up at the ass crack of dawn to drive back to the Tsushimas and wake up the kids, he expects that Dazai actually comes to bed, and, at

least, makes up for the lack of sleep with *cuddles*.

Chuuya should try to sleep while he still can, but now that he's half-awake and alone in a gigantic bed that someone as small as him simply shouldn't sleep in all by himself, he gets up anyway, wrapping a blanket around himself. The hallway outside the bedroom is dark, but there's a faint light seeping through the crack of the door at the end of the hallway.

Dazai's in his office.

The room is overflowing with stacks of papers, files, and documents — something that was not the case last time Chuuya was here, though admittedly, it's been a while. Dazai's in the middle of having a silent staring contest with his laptop and absently chewing on a pencil when his gaze flickers to Chuuya, surprise blooming on his face.

Chuuya rubs his eyes and leans against the doorframe, hugging the blanket closer to his body. "What the hell are you doing?"

"...working."

"At three in the morning?"

"It's not that late."

Fine. It isn't. Chuuya supposes a lot of people get work done in the middle of the night. Still, somehow, whenever he went home, he never imagined Dazai to spend his free time slaving away.

Has he been doing this all along?

"Is it your father?" Chuuya wants to know.

Is this some sort of punishment for going to Paris?

Dazai's expression softens, arms stretching behind his back before he pulls out one of the many folders from the pile on his desk and shoves it forward for Chuuya to see. "It's not for him, but for myself."

Chuuya takes a few steps closer to read. *Executive summary. Implementation. Goals and Outlook. Billing and Scheduling.* Aside from a few basic economy classes, he never dealt with anything business-related, but this does suspiciously look like some sort of plan.

He glances at Dazai. "You want to... lead your own project?"

"I want to lead my own *business*."

Oh.

Oh.

Chuuya feels himself grin. "Really?"

"Really."

"Hey, that's great." He takes the file into his hands again, hesitating to open it, but Dazai's nod tells him to go on. There's more text but pictures too, and Chuuya starts getting a vague concept of what Dazai's working on.

"A speakeasy bar," he hears Dazai provide across from him. "If there's one scene I'm well-versed in, it's this. Drinks. Entertainment. Games. Discreet. Mysterious."

Sounds like someone Chuuya knows.

"It's perfect," he murmurs, flipping through the pages. It's not just him being supportive... he's actually impressed by the idea, the picture the proposal is trying to paint becoming clearer and clearer with each word. "When are you going to tell your father about it?"

"Friday."

"Hey, that fits." Tanizaki and Higuchi have been trying to find a day for a cocktail night for ages, and, at last, they settled on next Friday. "We can celebrate afterwards."

Dazai doesn't look that convinced, and that is an unusual sight.

Chuuya sits down, brows furrowing. "You don't think he's going to like it?"

"The idea should be fine, but the timing isn't ideal."

Right. Something went wrong on that business trip. Chuuya didn't hear the details earlier. Dazai only mentioned it in passing and then successfully distracted him with sex, but he didn't sound very happy about it.

"It's going to be fine," Chuuya insists, settling deeper into the chair and crossing his legs under the blanket. "Everything looks great, you are great, and he's going to think so too. And if not..." Then Chuuya might

just punch the shit out of his host father. "...then fuck him. You can pull it off without your father."

Dazai's chuckle is dry. "It's not a hotel chain, but it would still cost a few dozen million yen. It depends on his support."

"Then you'll just have to be very convincing, which, as you might know, is one of your many abilities."

"Hmm."

Stifling a yawn, Chuuya pillows his chin on his knees and watches Dazai sort through a few documents.

Without looking up, Dazai says, "You know you can go to sleep, right?"

"'s fine."

It's clear that Dazai cares. After everything, the least Chuuya can do is stay and offer moral support.

Dazai's eyes narrow. "You sure that you want to sacrifice your precious sleep?" Chuuya stares back and gives him a resolute nod. Yes, he will most likely regret it, but right now, it doesn't matter. "Fine. Suit yourself then."

Dazai's a quiet and collected worker, but Chuuya can see how tense and exhausted he is under all those ridiculous layers. So around the four o'clock mark, Chuuya forces him to take a break and massages his shoulders, trying to get, at least, some of the tension to drain out. Dazai's not very happy about it, stiff even, but with each push and twist of hands, Chuuya feels his muscles relax under him and smiles proudly to himself.

Sometimes Dazai looks up, thick lashes fluttering, asking him for a synonym, and other times, he explains the logistics out loud, wondering if it makes sense. Chuuya doubts he's much help, but hey, Dazai doesn't complain.

By the time Dazai calls it a ‘night,’ it's six in the morning, which means that sleeping would be useless. Chuuya does a few jumping jacks to stop himself from curling up on the floor and taking a five-minute power nap. In the end, what ultimately helps him stay awake is the shower he takes with Dazai. Ten thousand times better than any energy drink.

When Dazai steps out to leave, Chuuya stays for a few minutes longer, letting the hot water rain down on his skin. Once out, he speed-dries himself while looking for the clothes he left in the apartment somewhere, half-jumping because the towel around his waist is a little too long.

He finds his leather leggings and cropped sweater in the kitchen, which makes sense, yeah, considering yesterday's affair started right there, waiting for the pasta to boil turned into kissing and kissing turned into Dazai blowing him and that turned into getting fingered on a chair.

Fun.

"Five more minutes," Dazai announces like he's some sort of moderator commenting on the reality show that is Chuuya's life. The only reason he doesn't snap is that the idiot also hands him an avocado toast with a fried egg—his favorite.

As Chuuya tries to squeeze his ass into the tight pants, he shoots him a scowl. "Since when do you have food in your fridge?"

"Since you came back from Paris."

"Okay," Chuuya says slowly, not any brighter but also too much in a hurry to solve the intricate puzzle that is Dazai's brain sometimes. "I'm ready."

It's still dark outside when they pull out of the garage, a fine mist hanging in the deserted streets, but considering the time, Chuuya's not only awake but also in a half-good mood.

Maybe his rule of not sleeping over shouldn't be a rule, after all.

"I'm busy, Dazai, so make it quick."

Dazai spent days debating whether he should create a PowerPoint or perhaps take his father to see the place he intends to turn into the bar right away, but both these things would require patience and participation.

Gen'emon does not possess either.

Instead, Dazai stuck every word and idea and plan into twenty pages, which he now hands over to his father even as they walk past office

walls and doors.

"Imagine a place where people can lose themselves in for one night," he says around the thunder of his heart in his ears. "A bar in the style of a speakeasy. Not just a mainstream club, not for everyone, but —"

His father holds up his hand, making Dazai's words grind to a halt. "You want to open a bar?"

"More or less, yes."

It is, in fact, more than just a bar. It's about the atmosphere. About the possibility to forget about the colorless, mundane reality for a few hours. About bending the rules and social conventions.

Shaking his head, Gen'emon slaps the file back against his chest, his pace not once slowing down. "I give you the chance to become the chairman of an international and successful hotel chain, and you want to open a bar?" Dazai's breath falters. "And who's supposed to fund all this fun? Let me guess. Me?"

"It's a proposal," Dazai says, returning the file once again. "You can read through it when you have more time. It's an opportunity to start and grow my own business."

"Your own," his father scoffs. "How am I supposed to believe that you can handle an entire business when you can't even represent this company without sabotaging crucial deals?"

"It was doomed to fail before I got there. I told you that." Repeatedly. Though it didn't seem to get through him then, and it doesn't seem to get through him now. The elevator doors slide open, and his father sends him one last cutting scowl, letting out a sigh as if he is looking at the most disappointing thing in his entire life. He probably is.

They're still close enough for Dazai to hear him mutter, "Fucking bar..." before the doors slide shut, and Dazai's left standing there and watching the button glow red.

He took a chance on himself. How very stupid.

Dazai was supposed to pick him up tonight, but he texted him saying he'd be running late, so Chuuya asks Yosano and Kouyou for a ride. He still talks to Yosano now and then, exchanging outfit pictures and memes, but he can't help but feel like there's an undercurrent of

tension ever since Paris. As if Chuuya's an awful person for simply wanting a casual relationship — not to mention that they both agreed to keep it simple from the very start.

Tonight, she seems to be in a merciful mood, choosing to flirt with her girlfriend rather than antagonize Chuuya, which is okay with him. The apartment that Higuchi and Tanizaki share is near the landmark tower. Even though he isn't surprised anymore, their wealth, feeling so nonchalant and effortless, never ceases to make him feel ridiculously small in comparison. Once he's back in Paris, in his humble three-bedroom apartment with his dads and Baki, Chuuya will only be able to dream about this — or look at his photo gallery.

Tanizaki lets them in with his cheeks already flushed and splotchy, giving Chuuya and Kouyou a tour of the place. It's bigger and louder than expected; Chuuya doesn't know half of the people present, and it's much less of a cocktail night and instead more of a *let's wreck this place until someone calls the cops on us* kind of party. Chuuya settles on beer and cigarettes, for now, telling Higuchi about the Paris trip and that his father is already feeling much better. The living room is crowded with people playing drinking games and dancing around, so Chuuya mostly tries to listen to people he's speaking to, but when he hears several voices yell the name "Dazai!" he perks up.

Higuchi waves him away with an understanding smile. So Chuuya finds himself pushing past people, only slightly tipsy — tipsy, not drunk! Ultimately, he finds Dazai in the kitchen, eyeing a near-empty box of pizza.

"Here you are," he says, bumping Dazai's hip. "I was starting to think you ditched us."

Dazai opts for a glass of water instead, offering Chuuya only the barest hint of a smile. "You need a place to sleep tonight, and I doubt you'd like to wake up on the sticky floor."

True.

Chuuya's free tomorrow, so he informed Hayashi he would be staying over. However, the plan was always to sleep at Dazai's. "How thoughtful of you. So, how did it go?"

"It... remains to be seen."

"You didn't pitch the idea?"

"He still has to read through it."

"Oh," Chuuya says, "well... good. If your father takes his time reading through your proposal, it means it's important. And once he does, I'm sure he'll approve."

Happy seems too positive of a reaction for a man like Gen'emon Tsushima, but Chuuya doesn't see why he wouldn't like Dazai's idea either. It's profitable. Bars are always overcrowded and therefore needed. Dazai's reputation will make people die to check it out. It's simply genius.

Wrapping his hand around Dazai's wrist, Chuuya tugs him along. "Now, stop hiding in the kitchen, and let's do something fun."

Barely an hour passes before Chuuya switches to wine, which might not be hard liquor, but enough to cling to Dazai like a lifeline, feeling needy. By now, their thing is hardly a secret, so when Dazai pulls him on his lap, hands rubbing up and down the length of his thighs, Chuuya doesn't complain, instead melting into his warmth, wiggling his ass side to side just to feel that soft puff of breath against his neck. A few of their friends join them on the couch, and even though there's an animated conversation happening, Chuuya only half-listens, too busy playing a dangerous game of teasing with Dazai and then suffering the consequences.

So when someone — no, Higuchi utters his name, he has to pull out of his Dazai-induced haze to orientate himself. "Huh?"

"I mean, you're basically a couple now, right?" Higuchi asks.

"They aren't," Tanizaki says, then looks at them. "Right? You aren't."

"Uh, no." Chuuya straightens his shoulder, tugging his brows into somewhat of a frown. He's aware of how rich that must sound when Dazai's arms are currently wrapped around his waist, but god forbid you show affection to your fuck buddy slash friend in public!

"Oh," Higuchi stammers out, her cheeks reddening as her gaze darts behind Chuuya, then back to him. She winces. "I just assumed — uh..."

"Well, stop assuming." Chuuya makes a *what the hell* gesture, though he doubts it gets across. "We're just having fun. That's all. I thought you people were familiar with the term *casual*?!"

He figures that's the end of the story since Dazai doesn't offer any

stupid comments either. It should be the end of it. There's nothing more to discuss.

Except that Dazai doesn't really offer much of anything for the rest of the night. Chuuya only notices how much he liked the hand squeezing his knee once it slips away.

(What he doesn't realize at this very moment is that this.... *this is how it starts.*)

The door of Dazai's apartment falls shut with a firm thud, cutting off the wind of the storm that's been brewing outside and bathing the two of them in ripe, heavy silence as they undress.

Chuuya brushes a strand of loose hair out of his face and sighs. "You're angry."

"I'm not," Dazai replies.

"Yeah, because you haven't been ignoring me all night or anything."

That earns him a nasty look. "What does it matter when it's just fun?"

Chuuya's eyes fall shut for a moment. *God fucking damn it.* He can't believe he's forced to have this argument all over again. Following Dazai into the kitchen, he considers his words, which is harder than it sounds. He doesn't want to come off like an inconsiderate jerk, but he doesn't want to keep repeating the same thing over and over either. It's a fine line to balance.

"I thought we both agreed to it," he finally says, settling on the other side of the bar, watching Dazai check the fridge. "Casual. That's all it was ever was supposed to be. Am I wrong?"

"That was before..."

"Before what?"

"Before everything." Dazai turns, wearing a crystalline frown. "Tell me. Were all your casual relationships like this?"

Chuuya feels a little lost. "I don't know. I've never had one before." Boyfriends? Well, one, but yes. One-night stands? Totally. Friends with benefits? Not so much.

"*I* did. And it was never like this."

"What kind of reasoning is that?" Chuuya huffs. "You know, I've had an actual boyfriend too before, and it was never like this either." As soon as the words are out, whizzing through the air like bullets, he regrets saying them.

It is the truth. Dazai isn't in any way comparable to Romaine. It just sounds infinite times harsher than he meant it to.

Dazai's finger tap against the counter of the bar. "Right. Pretty hard to live up to a guy who cheated on you, hm?"

"You know I didn't mean it like that. I just —" He sucks in a deep breath, a loose cannon in his chest waiting to go off because this is so unfair. "I mean, what do you expect from me, Dazai? You said it would be *casual* the first time it happened. You said it's *okay* when I told you I don't want a fucking relationship. You said —"

"I know what I said."

"Then what the hell is your problem?!"

"The problem is that I'm fucking in love with you!" Dazai shouts back, and —

Chuuya's muscles freeze.

The conversation has been heading here all along, he realizes. Why else would someone not want a casual relationship? But — but hearing it out loud is like watching a river go up in explosive flames — it's not possible — it's —

"No, you aren't," he stammers out.

And that's *not* the right answer.

Dazai's voice is as quiet as the soft patter of rain against the window outside. "I think I know better what I feel and don't feel."

"No," Chuuya says, shaking his head again and again, "you think you —" He can't even say it out loud. It sounds ridiculous. "— you think you do, but you don't."

"Stop patronizing me." And now Dazai sounds *hurt*, and that's even worse because the last thing Chuuya ever wanted to do was hurt him in any way, but what is he supposed to do here?

"You're Dazai," he whispers. "You're —"

"I'm what?"

He's the future heir of an entire goddamn empire. According to Kouyou, he's the fucking devil. According to everyone else, he's everything but someone who falls in love with his fuck buddy. Chuuya knows there's so much more to him than that, and yet.

And yet.

When he doesn't say anything, Dazai cracks a tight-lipped, bitter smile, and it breaks Chuuya's heart.

"You've made up this entire persona around me but refuse to actually look at who is in front of you. Is it really that unbelievable that I could love you?"

Chuuya scrubs a hand across his face. *No.* "I'm sorry."

The only thing in reply is silence.

Dazai just dropped a bomb of epic proportions between them, and there's no way around it anymore, no way to get back to where they were before. It's impossible to ignore. And there are only so many potential outcomes.

"I just..." Chuuya grips the counter with a white-knuckled grip. "I told you about my ex. I don't want that ever again."

Dazai's gaze flickers to him and softens. "Chuuya," he says. "If that's your only concern, then I've got news for you because I haven't thought about anyone else since the very first time I saw you. It's been you and only you ever since. It's always going to be you."

No...

It's not the only concern, though.

"People always say that and then..."

"I'm not just some people," Dazai snaps, and before Chuuya registers what's happening, he's in front of him, clinging to his shoulders like he will die if the words don't get out. "I'm Dazai. I'm the guy who would fly across the world every day to see you. I'm the guy who would burn it down for you. And I'm telling you I would *never* —"

"Stop," Chuuya says. "Just stop."

"Why are you so afraid?"

"It's not just that, okay?" Chuuya withdraws from his grip, taking a few steps away and trying to clear his head. "Sure, you would fly across the world, but it's not that easy. Long-distance relationships simply aren't that easy! A-And what if your father makes you date someone else again, huh? What then? I don't want to be on the other side of the world imagining you with someone else."

"I would say no."

"It's not that simple! What if it's that or this penthouse? Or your trust fund? Or your family? I don't want you to choose me over your life. I don't want you to risk your whole future every time you're together with me."

"So what," Dazai asks flatly. "You want me to spend the rest of my life doing what my father wants me to do?"

"No. No, you're twisting my fucking words. I just want you to do things at your own pace, and not because you feel like you have to for me."

Maybe Dazai doesn't hear him.

Maybe he's just too stubborn.

"You've listed a dozen reasons why you don't want this, and none of them were that you don't feel the same." Chuuya swallows. "Look me in the eye," Dazai says, "and tell me you feel nothing, and I will drop it. I will leave you alone."

Chuuya doesn't want to, every nerve in his body screaming when he slowly lifts his head, meeting Dazai's gaze. He doesn't want Dazai to leave him alone. *He doesn't want any of this.* "It's not that easy."

"It is. Just a simple *yes* or *no*. That's it." Dazai takes his hand between his fingers, his thumb rubbing reassuring circles into his skin. That touch alone is nearly enough to break Chuuya. "That's all I need," Dazai whispers.

No matter how much Chuuya might want it, there's no way back anymore. They crossed that line ten minutes ago.

Chuuya squeezes his hand, water pooling in his eyes. "No."

Dazai's eyes flutter shut, and he nods. "Thank you."

He hates that Dazai lifts his hand and kisses it, mouth feather-light against his skin, before he, true to his promise, steps away and leaves him alone. Chuuya hates that there are now tears streaming down his face, while Dazai's just quiet. He hates that it feels like he's making the biggest mistake of his life even though he knows it's the right choice.

Dazai deserves someone who 100% loves him without any *buts* or *if*s. Dazai deserves someone without all these issues and doubts and back and forths. Dazai deserves someone who isn't Chuuya.

"I can't do the casual thing anymore," Dazai says somewhere. There but miles away.

Chuuya nods and then nods again, pressing a fist against his mouth because the crying makes it hard to breathe, let alone speak. "Yeah."

He's losing his best friend. The best friend he ever had.

"Do you want me to drive you home?"

Even if he wanted to, Chuuya wouldn't be able to speak, so he shakes his head and then pushes away from the counter, but — Dazai —

"I'm sorry," Chuuya whispers.

The warmth in Dazai's eyes that still lingered moments ago has died out. He shrugs, unfazed. "Don't be."

Chuuya nods. He gets that. He understands that Dazai has to do this now, that he has to protect himself even if it's by pushing him away, so he bites down the consuming urge to cross the distance and hug him, apologize until his mouth bleeds, or just do anything, anything to reverse this, anything to take them back to a time where it was still simple and uncomplicated even if it's selfish. He bites it down and instead increases the distance between them until he's standing outside in the pouring rain, trying to use his phone to call the family driver. Until there's so much distance between them, Chuuya doubts they'll ever come into each other's orbit again, and thinking about that future —

It hurts more than anything else he's ever experienced.

Chapter End Notes

and we have officially reached the angst arc :3 this one's going to be a long one, my friends! hope you're ready

Chapter 19: One Does Not Simply Get Over Someone In Less Than Two Weeks

Chapter Notes

> I'm super sorry for this late update after leaving y'all with a cliffhanger like that!!!!! I'm just swamped these days!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Ah, shit —" The legs on Chuuya's shoulders shake violently, trying to clamp shut, and he doubles his effort, creating a tight suction with his lips as his fingers speed up. She — Tsujimura, he keeps reminding himself — curls her hands in the sheets before a broken, stuttering gasp rips out of her as she rocks her hips down to meet him over and over, chasing her own orgasm. "Oh my god, don't stop — fuck — yes —"

Chuuya doesn't stop. Not until Tsujimura gently pushes his face away, at least. Chest heaving, he sits back on his knees, watching as she wipes a hand over her sweaty forehead and lets out a breathless laugh. "Okay, so you weren't lying about liking giving head."

"So glad you agree." Chuuya is good at it, no doubt there, but as he glances down at himself, and to be more precise, the lack of hard-on there, his confidence pales like a wilting lily. Did he drink too much? Is that it?

If Tsujimura notices anything, she's polite about it, wordlessly pulling him up, then down for a kiss, hand sliding down the planes of his stomach. Chuuya meets every hot brush of tongues with eagerness, trying to not think but just let his body react naturally. God knows how many times he got hard without so much as a touch in the last few months —

But that was with Dazai and —

Tsujimura pulls away, blinking. "Is something wrong?"

Aside from the fact that he's thinking of his ex fuck buddy slash friend while hooking up with someone? No.

"I'm fine." Chuuya makes a face, grimacing. "Just —"

Her eyes wander down, then back up. She shrugs. "It sometimes happens with booze. Let me see if I can do something about that."

She flips them over, pressing her whole body against him as she kisses him, wet and open-mouthed, before descending lower and lower.

Physically, everything she does feels good. Her lips are soft, with just the right amount of pressure and friction. It's just that —

Chuuya bites down on his teeth, refusing to go there. Not here. Not now. Not ever.

All he has to do is relax and enjoy the pleasure that is rolling through his blood vessels, no matter whether his dick agrees or not.

And then Tsujimura pulls off, making Chuuya's eyes flutter open with hazy confusion. "You know," she says nonchalantly, "I have toys. I could fuck you if you're up for it."

He braces himself on his elbows. If this was any other time, he'd agree in a heartbeat. As it is, today is not Chuuya's night. (Not his *week*, either.)

Scrubbing a hand across his face, he lets out a sigh. "I'm sorry. I think I'll just go home."

"Oh. Okay?"

Chuuya slips off the bed, feeling even worse than before Tachihara forcefully dragged him out of the house and to the club so he would stop moping, which is ironic, really, because it's not like *he* got rejected. The days that followed afterwards sure felt like it, though. "I'm really sorry."

"Hey, I came more tonight than you so..." Tsujimura trails off in a shrug. "Do hope that you'll figure out whatever is keeping you so tense. You have my number if you ever want to give it another try."

As nice it is that she's so cool about it, it doesn't make finding his clothes and getting dressed any less awkward. He was hoping the night air would help with all the complicated emotions nuking his brain, but even as he steps outside, Chuuya still feels heavy and listless and so, so exhausted. The only thing that sounds appealing right now is crawling into bed and never coming out again.

So he's not sure what devil drives him to take out his phone and press

down to call a number — not just any number, but Dazai's.

Maybe it's because every time Chuuya felt bad, Dazai was there to distract him, make him laugh again, and now that they're not even speaking anymore, Chuuya has no idea how to fix himself anymore. Maybe he simply misses Dazai. (*So much.*) Or maybe Chuuya is too drunk for his own god.

In the end, it doesn't matter because he waits and waits and waits. Dazai never picks up.

Peep.

"Hey," Chuuya says, "it's me. Chuuya. Which you can probably tell... unless you deleted my number —" What the hell is he even talking about? "— anyways, I don't know why I'm calling you. I guess I miss you. And I know that it's selfish of me to ask but if there's any way we can still be friends... or just talk once in a while because I —" *miss you so fucking much.* "— I don't want to lose you over this. So yeah. Call me. Or don't..." He trails off, so close to deleting the entire thing but not actively doing anything to stop it from sending either.

Later, after swiping out of his contact list and calling himself a cab, Chuuya shoves his hands into the pockets of his bomber jacket and stares up at the endless sky, waiting for a shooting star that never comes.

Chuuya tries the whole have sex with someone else thing again five days later. This time it's at one of Tachihara's gigs — he should really start being a better friend and stop ditching those — with a guy named Tetchou.

Chuuya has never thought of himself as someone with a preference, but

maybe he's gotten so used to Dazai, his height and build, and that whole jackass-with-a-soft-heart-demeanor that hooking up with someone who has dark hair and is a head taller than him won't hurt.

It, more or less, works. Chuuya's body works just like it should. Tetchou doesn't complain either. Everything's great.

Except it isn't.

Chuuya doesn't feel that certain satisfaction in his chest when he

comes because Tetchou doesn't make him ride out the high for long enough. The way his hands cup the back of Chuuya's thighs is all wrong, and

Tetchou's lips don't make his whole face buzz from the mind-numbing pressure against him, and —

It's *nothing* like it should be.

It's all fucked.

The physical memories of Dazai are stubborn stains, and no matter how much Chuuya scrubs his fingers to the bone, they won't get out.

Chuuya spent his last Sunday with Kouyou, trying to distract himself but actually complaining about how much everything sucks, so when a new one comes around, he nearly forgets what it means.

Until the doorbell rings and Chuuya is so nice to open the door.

And *oh*.

"Dazai."

For a few moments, Chuuya stands there, dumbstruck, like this isn't Dazai's house he's in. Then his brain finally reboots, and he blurts out an awkward "oh, hey" before stepping aside, cringing at his own words.

"Hey," Dazai replies far more smoothly as he shrugs off his

cream-colored coat — *new*, Chuuya thinks, and toes out off his shoes.

"How are you?" Chuuya asks in a feeble attempt to make this situation a tiny little bit less tense.

"I'm fine. Kind of busy." Dazai turns around, finally looking at him, and Chuuya feels like he's falling off a cliff. "What about you?"

"Same as always."

Chuuya opens his mouth — he wants to tell him how much he's missed him, that he has trouble sleeping at night, and that it always makes him think of Dazai, but he can't say any of this because everything's different now. "Well," Chuuya scratches back of his head, "dinner will only be ready in about half an hour, so..."

Dazai nods. "I know. I wanted to talk to you if that's all right with you."

"You do?"

"Yes, Chuuya." It doesn't sound mean or cold or anything like Chuuya imagined it would be after the last time they talked to each other. On the contrary, there's a tiny, lopsided smile tugging at the corner of Dazai's mouth. "I do."

"Oh, okay. Cool. We can go to my room unless...." Unless Dazai's not comfortable with that? Chuuya has no idea how to act around him with everything that happened. It's not like Dazai's feelings bother him — no one can control that, for fuck's sake — it's just unexpected and new, and even though it would be easy to act like nothing's changed, Chuuya doesn't want to hurt him more than he already did.

Dazai looks amused. "Your room is fine." By now, though, Chuuya knows how great of an actor he is, and the easy smile on his face is pale in comparison to the expression he wore that night. *That* was real.

Once the door falls closed, Chuuya sits down on his bed. Dazai makes himself comfortable at his desk. Two weeks ago, Chuuya wouldn't have even batted an eyelash at the picture, now his heart is thundering in his ears, the room feeling a thousand times smaller than it actually is.

"Sorry I never replied to your call," Dazai starts. "I've been working, and classes started again."

The call. *The voice mail.*

Chuuya forces himself not to look away, even if he'd rather get swallowed up by the fucking ground. "Don't worry about that. I was, uh, drunk anyway. Rambling like a fucking idiot."

"I noticed," Dazai says, eyes shimmering as if he is trying to hold back laughter. "The drunk part. I don't think you're an idiot and I wouldn't mind being friends with you."

For the first time since that night, Chuuya feels a bashful flame in the shape of hope flicker on inside him. "Yeah?"

"Yes. I realize now that I overreacted."

Chuuya immediately shakes his head. "You just said what you felt. That's not overreacting. You're allowed to do that, you know."

"I know, but I had a rather unpleasant week back then, and everything piled on top of each other, and I..." Dazai trails off and folds one leg over the other before meeting Chuuya's stare. "I'm seeing things clearer now.

And I think I am already starting to get over the whole *love* thing."

It takes a few seconds for the words to register. Chuuya blinks.

Okay.

That... was fast.

But that's good, right?

Chuuya schools his surprise into a more neutral smile. "Wow. I'm..."

"Relieved beyond words? Happy? Ecstatic?" Dazai grins widely. "Yes, me too."

"You're not lying to me, are you?" he has to ask because this is Dazai, and nothing is ever easy with Dazai. And Chuuya is not an expert on *falling in love* and *love*, only having done that himself one time before, but he is pretty sure one does not simply get over someone in less than two weeks.

"I might be slightly exaggerating, but the point remains that whatever is in here —" Dazai points at his chest. "— is nothing that this here —" Dazai's finger now lifts to his head." — cannot deal with. An obstacle, yes, but not the end of the world. Looking back at it now, it is quite pathetic, actually."

Chuuya wouldn't say that hearing Dazai call his feelings for him pathetic is *nice*, but he figures it's better than that god-awful radio silence. And it's what Chuuya wanted, in the end. Having Dazai back as his best friend. It's good. It is.

"Great," Chuuya says, pressing out a smile. "I'm glad that you feel... better now."

"Like someone recovering from syphilis."

Uh... okay?

"The only condition that I have," Dazai says, "is no more sex."

Chuuya nods. "Yeah, I get that." It's reasonable. Totally doable.

"Perfect." Dazai stands up. "I forgot that I have an important call to make, but we'll see each other at dinner, yes?"

As Chuuya watches him stroll out of his room, lifting his phone to press it against his ear, he can't help but frown. He should be happy about this outcome, but something feels off. He's just not sure *what*.

There was a short period of time before Chuuya and Dazai started hooking up, in which they were only friends, so this shouldn't be all that different.

Except it is.

It takes more than an entire week for them to see each other again, which Chuuya understands. He does. Dazai has work, class, and other friends. (And more likely than not, seeing Chuuya brings up certain feelings even if the idiot insists he's already starting to get over them.) So yes, not hanging out every day makes sense, but it doesn't make it any less hard to adjust to. It's a lot like going from two-hundred-and-fifty miles per hour to ten.

(And perhaps Chuuya got a little addicted to the speed.)

On top of that, Chuuya's dealing with his own affairs. His sex life — or, lack thereof, to be more precise, which leaves him more than a little frustrated. Having to settle for shower handjobs by himself after months of good, honest, and exciting sex is... hard.

And to make matters even more complicated, Dazai decides that the first thing they should do together as new friends is go shopping. Being in public instead of an intimate setting like Dazai's penthouse? Yup, makes sense. Watching Dazai strip out of his clothes over and over as he tries on different suits while getting fitted for a new one? Not so much.

Chuuya pretends to be busy on his phone even though all he does is refreshing his Instagram feed, but at one point, his gaze accidentally wanders, and Dazai's fucking ass is right in front of him, and —

He squeezes his eyes shut.

Surely this is some sort of punishment, right? Dazai's way of saying

"too bad you said no to all of this."

Yeah, too fucking bad.

"So," Chuuya says in an attempt to distract himself, "you know how it's my birthday at the end of the month?"

Dazai hums. "You're turning nineteen, right? Sometimes I forget how young you are."

Not *that* young.

"Yeah, and you remember how I told Hayashi I could make use of Fitzgerald's gift for my birthday? With... you?" Dazai looks over his shoulder, waiting for him to continue. "Is that still on? Because if you don't want to anymore, I can ask Tachihara to come with me. Or Kouyou."

Dazai's mouth opens, but at that exact moment, his phone starts buzzing. "Excuse me for one moment," he tells Chuuya and picks up, his thoughtful expression melting into a warm, colorful smile. "Hey."

Chuuya's brows furrow as he watches him.

"No, don't worry. I'm not doing anything important right now."

It's not like Chuuya is sitting a few feet away and able to hear everything the damned idiot says, but okay.

Dazai's not facing him anymore, but he repeatedly nods, even letting out a raspy chuckle here and there. "I'd say the color... *red*. Wonderful. I'm looking forward to it. See you later. Bye."

"Hot date?" Chuuya jokes out of pure habit. He doesn't really consider whether it's too soon, and he also doesn't expect Dazai to stiffen in front of him as he shoots Chuuya an odd look.

"No. Just... work."

Just work?

Since when does Dazai use *that* voice for work? Every time Chuuya heard him speak about working for his father, it was always combined with a muttered insult. And Dazai's acting strange, refusing to look at him.

Chuuya's not saying it is a hot date, but it certainly wasn't work. Just why would he lie about this?

Sure, Dazai dating other people feels rushed, and the mere idea makes his chest feel tight — because it's *so ridiculous* after all the dramatics they went through — but... Dazai can tell Chuuya if that's the case. He doesn't have to lie about it like they're still in high school and playing the will-they-won't-they-game.

"Back to your question," Dazai says, tugging at his collar. "I will have to check with my calendar first, but it should be fine."

"And you're fine with it too?"

Dazai shrugs. "Yes, Chuuya, I will survive sharing a bed with you. My poor little heart will not break."

Chuuya rolls his eyes. "Fine," he huffs. "Then it's a date." He winces. "Or..."

Dazai shoots him another nasty look as he puts on a pair of deep-blue slacks.

Chuuya holds up his okay. "Geez, okay. I will shut up now."

"Much appreciated. Now, how do I look?"

Towards the end of April, Gen'emon hosts a company-internal function at the house. It's a small affair, one that Chuuya wouldn't be part of if he didn't have to look after the kids.

He snatches a chicken skewer from one of the waiters flitting around before heading towards the place where he last saw Gin and Ryuu, the backyard. As he's about to make a right turn, Dazai comes out of the kitchen, and Chuuya's mood immediately brightens. "Hey. Want to hide in the backyard with me and the kids?"

Before he can get a reply, someone else stumbles out behind him, a young woman, not much older than Dazai. She giggles under her breath as she says, "Thank you for... the napkin," before walking away.

"I'll be there in a second," Dazai calls after her, then turns to Chuuya, offering him only a remnant of the smile he wore a moment ago as he fixes the collar of his unbuttoned shirt. "Sorry. I can't ditch this event, or my father will lose his head. Again."

Right.

Chuuya nods. "It's fine."

"I can stop by later?" Dazai presses his lips together as if he just remembered something. "Or, let's say, tomorrow. We can grab lunch?"

"Sounds good."

"Perfect."

Chuuya can't help but notice how tousled Dazai's hair looks as he walks away. Like someone drove their hands through it.

On the way to the backyard, an odd, heavy weight wraps itself around his heart like a rusty chain, and Chuuya has no choice but to come to two conclusions.

One: he almost walked in on Dazai and someone else.

Two: he's... jealous.

And that's completely ridiculous.

Why the hell would Chuuya be jealous?! Okay, so maybe he wants to be the one sneaking around with Dazai, blood pumping as they trade(d) secret kisses in the kitchen and fucked in the bathroom, but —

But that was *then*.

He gets why they can't do that anymore — at least, not without hurting Dazai.

Chuuya forces out a breath as he finds the kids, Gin pushing her brother on the swing. He refuses to dwell on this. Dazai's allowed to hook up with other people. Date them. (That scene earlier wasn't dating, though. Was it?) Dazai is allowed to move on and find happiness with someone that will give him the things he deserves, the things Chuuya can't give him. Fuck, Chuuya should be happy about it, so why the fuck isn't he?

Because, a tiny voice in the back of his brain whispers, *he doesn't just miss the sex. He misses the small moments in-between. The breathless jokes. The laughter that Chuuya hid in the warmth of Dazai's neck. The "loves" and the "chibis." The knowledge he'd have someone to turn to no at any hour at night, someone to turn to when it literally felt like his world*

was about to come crashing down.

Because the truth is that bit by bit, day by day, Dazai has been slipping out of his life since that night. They might call it friendship and new rules, but in reality, it's distance. Plain and simple.

Does it make Chuuya selfish for wanting all these things without ever putting a name on it? Probably.

Does it make him a coward? Yeah.

Does it stop him from craving it anyway? No.

Chuuya entertains the kids for a while, but once the sun sets, the air gets chilly, and Ryuu wants a cup of tea while Gin wants a piece of the chocolate cake the cooks have made, so back inside it is. He keeps his eyes solely on the food, he does, but it's impossible to ignore Dazai and the way he's feeding that same girl from earlier cake right there in front of everyone, and — Chuuya's stomach revolts.

He turns away.

Her delighted laughter reaches his ears anyway.

"We can get some more later," he tells Gin and walks both of them as far away from here, from Dazai and that girl and the guests, as possible before Chuuya does something really, really stupid.

He can't for the life of him fall asleep that night. Not because of the noises downstairs — growing up sharing his room with a few dozen kids, he learned how to ignore that — but because every time Chuuya closes his eyes, the image of Dazai fucking someone else appears. He turns this way and that, forcing himself to think of something else, of *anything,* his parents, Baki, even ballet and all the shows he will never be able to dance anymore, but it's like someone carved that picture into his skull, forcing him to see what he doesn't want to.

With a sigh, Chuuya gives up on any rest and reaches for his bottle of water, only to see that it's empty.

Great.

He slips into a pair of bunny slippers and ignores the nervous flutter of his stomach. Just a trip downstairs to get water.

That's it.

Except that Chuuya opens his door and freezes.

Dazai's standing in front of it, hand raised as if he was just about to knock. "Oh," he lets out in a breath, surprise coloring his face. "I came to tell you good night."

Chuuya looks for any sign of that girl, and his chest sags involuntary. Even if she could be waiting downstairs at this very moment, the cynic in the back of his head says. Then his eyes flicker back to Dazai. "I thought you were busy tonight."

"I am," Dazai replies with a casual shrug, "but I'm never too busy enough to make time for important things."

Chuuya's frown narrows even more.

See, this is where Dazai has lost him. How can he claim to be getting over it, then tell him things like this? How can he fool around with some girl and still end up in front of Chuuya's bedroom door at the end of the night? Unless —

Oh.

Oh no, that little...

Unless this has been Dazai's plan all along.

You have to be fucking kidding me.

Chuuya spent years dancing on a stage. So he knows a thing or two about performing: lashes fluttering, he lifts his fingers and tangles them in Dazai's collar before ever so slowly stepping into his personal space until they're only one shy breath apart. "Hey," he whispers and swallows audibly, "I miss you."

Dazai's tense all around him, eyes huge as he stares down at him, but his hand comes to rest on Chuuya's neck, keeping him away. Keeping deliberate distance.

"All you have to do is say the word," Dazai breathes out.

"I fucking knew it!" The act immediately drops, and Chuuya pushes Dazai away, leaving him stumbling into the wall behind him. "You've been doing all of this on purpose, haven't you?!"

Dazai's face doesn't fall, though. Not like it should! "Specify *all of this*, Chuuya. Don't be shy. What *exactly* have I been doing to you?"

Chuuya's hands ball into angry fists. There's no way he will fall into Dazai's trap again and give him an actual answer — only another damn step on his plan!

"What, cat got your tongue? Then let me try. You probably mean Minako-kun? See, I simply don't understand why you would call her that awful word. Unless..." His smile is slow and satisfied. "... you're jealous?"

Chuuya forces his eyes shut, shaking his head. He should have known Dazai was fucking bluffing the moment he started acting like everything was fucking fine. He should have known nothing that had to do with Dazai could ever be easy, not when complicated is written into his fucking DNA.

"It doesn't mean what you think it does," he finally says.

"Chuuya, are you even hearing yourself?"

"Shut up."

"You looked like you wanted to rip her head off every time you saw us together. Every time you so much as heard me talking about somebody else. Is that how you act with all your friends? Lucky them to have such a possessive *platonic* friend."

"Is that how you act with everyone you *love*?" Chuuya hisses. "Manipulating them just to get what you want?!"

The vicious glee in Dazai's eyes pales. "Making you jealous is hardly manipulation, Chuuya."

"Well, it's not fucking fair either!"

"All I did was show you what you're so terribly afraid of," Dazai says, the glare on his face blindingly cold. "Make with that what you will, but make up your fucking mind."

Chuuya's jaw clenches. "You're really going to tell *me* to make up my mind?"

It's Dazai who keeps switching faces. Not the other way around.

And still, the bastard has the audacity to nod. "I never took back the words that I said, and I'm not going to do it anytime soon."

"Neither did I."

Except Chuuya did.

Not out loud.

Never uttering the actual words.

But in a thousand different variations, he did take back his no. He crumpled it between his fingers and tossed it away like a crinkled sheet of paper, and now they both know it.

"Get out of my face," Chuuya whispers.

Dazai smiles like he expected that reply. "Self-awareness is the first step, Chuu~ya."

Chuuya bangs the door shut.

Well, *fuck*.

He really is in love with Dazai.

And it just became a fucking game.

Chapter End Notes

I love reading your comments and reactions! Thank you so much to every single one of you <3

Chapter 20: ... And This Is How It Ends

Chapter Notes

> Warnings for this chapter: there are some homophobic statements being made towards the middle/end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Hey, dad. Can I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

"Remember Dazai and Yosano's last night in Paris? We were watching spider-man, and then you and Dazai disappeared in the kitchen. What did you two talk about?"

It's April 27th.

Two days before his birthday.

One day before the trip to Mount Fuji.

And Chuuya is this close to calling the tourist office and canceling the whole thing because Dazai's supposed to be his plus one, and right now? They're not fucking talking.

Chuuya's never been a fan of celebrating his birthday, but even he doesn't want to spend the day in a passive-aggressive tug war with Dazai.

So either he cancels the trip (disappointing, but he'll survive), or make up with that idiot (very bad idea).

He's not sure what about asking his father this exact question is supposed to help him solve any of these options. Then again, deep down, Chuuya thinks he knows what he wants to hear.

On the other end of the line, Paul chuckles. "Is there anything you want to tell us?"

"Answer the question first," Chuuya asks, sounding a bit desperate. "Please?"

"Dazai asked me what he could do for you once you returned to Yokohama. What kind of things calm you down. Your favorite dishes.

Favorite movies." Chuuya's breath goes still. "I doubt he didn't already know all that, but it made a good impression. That boy really cares for you."

"Oh."

"Do we have to talk about eloping again? Your father still isn't 100% convinced."

Chuuya huffs out a breath, more confused with himself than ever. His eyes feel glassy as he murmurs, "long-distance relationships suck, dad."

"They can be challenging, yes."

No, they suck. And Chuuya's *needy* once he's in for something. Like a leech. Very hard to get rid of. He'd be completely miserable with one meeting every two months.

"You're supposed to agree and talk me out of it," he mutters, drawing patterns into the sheets of his bed. “Or am *I* supposed to bring up eloping again?”

"I don't want you to live thousands of miles away from home. I also don't want you to return to Paris and start resenting everything around you for what you left behind. Find the happy medium. You're a smart young man. I have faith that you can do it."

Happy medium?

With someone like Dazai?

It seems impossible.

Dazai's either his favorite person on the planet, or the guy Chuuya could strangle. They either fly over the highway with three hundred miles per hour or they fucking crawl in opposite direction. They tried doing the happy medium thing. It doesn't work. It's always either standing on top of the world and howling at the sky or falling down into an unforgiving abyss. Only highs or lows. Never something in-between.

But.

If Chuuya finds it hard to imagine an actual, long-distance relationship with Dazai, then thinking of spending the rest of his life without Dazai

is even worse. Returning to Paris without Dazai in his life anymore does not only sound unforgivable but unimaginable.

And that is exactly what's going to happen once September comes to an end. Chuuya will go back home. Dazai will stay. They'll go their separate ways, maybe find someone else, maybe someone who's less complicated, someone who isn't so scared. They could find happiness. Eventually. Just not like this. Not *with each other*.

The mere visual makes the beating thing inside Chuuya's chest wither like a wilting flower.

He doesn't *want* someone else.

And he doesn't want *Dazai* to love someone else.

"I have to do something," Chuuya finally decides, sitting up. "I'll talk to you later, okay?"

"Good luck."

To take that leap, he'll need it. Everything he ever wanted, everything he ever allowed himself to dream of, is on the other side of that fucking fear chained to his bones.

It's so close, Chuuya can almost taste it. All he has to do is take a run, spread his arms, and hope that Dazai will somehow catch him.

Pulse thundering in his ears, Chuuya opens his contact list and finds his name. Then he makes the call.

"Let me guess. You're replacing me with Tachihara?" Dazai says after picking up.

"No —"

"With Kouyou then?"

"No. Will you shut up for a minute, and let me speak, damn it?"

Dazai sighs. "Fine. Go ahead." *Break my heart, love. I'm ready.*

However, the only thing he can hear is silence.

"Chuuya?"

Dazai hears him clear his throat, swallow loudly, and then, only then —

"You win."

And —

Oh.

"I'll need you to elaborate on that, Chuuya," he hears himself say even as the two words make his whole world spin. "What exactly are you referring to? The ten consecutive wins in sea battle? The one —"

"Why can't you make it easy for me, huh? For once in your life?"

Dazai smiles. "Because I want to hear you say it."

He hates that Chuuya decided to do this over the phone when Dazai could be getting drunk on Chuuya's explosive frowns right now, make him glare even harder just to chase it away with a kiss.

"I-I'm not saying anything yet! I just meant that — that we can talk about it. See if it could work out. Or something!"

"I like *or something*." It sounds like it holds room for more, room for a future. Definitely more than Dazai expected to ever get — before and after Chuuya entered his life and turned it upside down.

"Good. Because that's all I'm giving you right now. You better appreciate it."

He does. More than Chuuya can imagine.

"Okay, Chuuya."

"So," Chuuya says commandingly, "tomorrow. Airport. Six o'clock. Not a minute later. And then we'll have four days to figure it out." At last, he releases an audible breath. "Yeah?"

"Yes, chibi."

"Then... I'll see you tomorrow."

"I can't wait," Dazai says, the smile lingering on his face making it hard to get anything other than basic replies out. Still, every syllable is true. He truly cannot wait. If he could knock himself out right now so he could wake up and go to the airport already he *would.* Without a

moment's hesitation.

The first thing he does once the line falls quiet is pinch himself.

He doesn't startle awake.

That means it's either a very deep sleep — a great rarity — or that this is *real.*

Option A seems far more likely.

For a man who stood in front of Chuuya and told him to make up his mind, it's an odd thing to say, but delivering a perfectly crafted pile of bullshit with confidence and actually believing in it are two very different things.

Chuuya's jealousy wasn't hard to read. His jaw muscles kept locking. Try as he might, he couldn't look Dazai in the eye. His replies were short, empty. He didn't even try to make his smile reach his eyes.

Facts.

But even then, he still refused to admit anything, refused to give Dazai an inch. (It's just the way he is. Stubborn, admnant, but perfect Chuuya.)

So yes, somewhere logic said that Chuuya would come around, that the whole month of charade would pay off in the end, but the moment the door banged shut in his face that night, all Dazai could hear was the soft "*no*" Chuuya had given him once. Over and over.

Fact is that Dazai always planned to break off their casual relationship at some point.

If not because that it hurt to feel like everything is right every time they were together, Chuuya loud and demanding but so loving in everything that he did, yet to still hear Chuuya write their relationship off as mere physical release, then because there's nothing more useful than a lesson in distance that makes the heart grow fonder. Sometimes, people don't see what's in front of them until they lose it and it becomes crystal-clear. It's an universal experience that happens time and time again because people have fooled themselves into thinking they are smarter their ancestors when the truth is that they repeat the same mistake over and over.

Fact is that Dazai *never* planned for it to hurt as much as it did. It

wasn't supposed to happen after that disaster of a business trip. It wasn't supposed to make him feel emotionally hollowed out. It wasn't supposed to make him sit there, hear the door fall shut after Chuuya left, and think to himself *what am I supposed to do now?*

Fact is that Dazai had all these plans to make someone love him, but in the end, he still ends up trying to wake up from a dream that isn't happening because all this time, he never believed Chuuya would actually say yes.

And now that he did... everything seems to shift into place.

Having to meet his father a few hours before the trip that is going to change everything — and be the start of something bigger, something new and exciting — seems to be the universe's way of keeping the scales balanced.

Dazai's not exactly upset as he enters the elevator, though. He doubts there is anything that could ruin his high right now. Let people shoot arrows at him. He will dodge them.

However, making the trip to his father's is as always a bothersome ordeal. Still, he keeps his expression neutral as he walks down the hallway that leads to Gen'emon's office. Better to keep the man happy for now and not give him any reason to make him complain.

Dazai knocks, waits, and enters.

His father gestures at the chair in front of his desk. "Sit down, son."

Son, huh?

Chuuya scowls as he considers the few dozen bouquet options in front of him. They're all stunning, but they're also somewhat over-the-top for a casual *thank you for showing up* present.

He wants to keep it simple. Easy. A happy medium, as Paul would say.

Then again... Chuuya is dying to surprise Dazai with a few flowers. It's a sweet gesture, right? And he is pretty sure no one ever bothered to give Dazai some.

The flower shop lady with the racing green apron grins when she approaches him, probably smelling his uncertainty from miles away and already plotting to exploit it for the shop's benefit. "For a

colleague, friend, family member, or someone special?"

"Someone, uh, special. But it's fresh! So nothing too fancy."

She nods as if customers tell her that all the time before leading them to a section of smaller bouquets and single flowers, rattling off names and symbolisms. Chuuya won't lie. He forgets about half of it once she mentions the spray roses.

Chuuya told himself not to get roses. Too romantic. Too serious. And way too cliché.

But they're *peach-white* and so, so cute.

So he gets the spray roses.

The shop is located right outside the airport, leaving him with another half an hour to spare before he's supposed to meet Dazai. Today, Chuuya doesn't really mind facing the sky and basking in the last rays of light that the sun has to offer, so he puts in his earphones, plays his favorite happy playlists and leisurely strolls down the path to the building.

It really is the perfect weather for such a life-changing day.

Dazai waits for his father to speak first, but instead of saying words, Gen'emon slides something towards him.

Not just *something*.

It's the business proposal. The one his father hasn't even mentioned once since Dazai gave it to him. Why he decides to return it now escapes Dazai.

"I finally had time to read through it," his father says with a curt nod towards it, making Dazai flip it open. "It's... well, good might be laying it on thick, but it's profitable. I can see which direction you were thinking of going with it."

The pages are covered in corrections and footnotes, most likely suggestions from his father.

"I would like to give you the necessary funding to start this "

Dazai blinks a few times, then looks up at his father. "Why the change of heart?"

"Even I can make wrong choices sometimes, Dazai. The whole Shibuwasa business used up all my nerves and patience, but now that they're dealt with I had a chance to give it a proper look."

Surely Dazai must be dreaming *now*? He pinches his thigh. Nope. Still awake.

How strange.

"Where's the catch?" he asks because he isn't stupid. Nothing from his father was ever free. It always comes with a price tag attached.

"You have to fucking work for it," Gen'emon snaps, "that's the catch. Obviously, it's the first draft. We'll have to revise a lot of it. You'll be drowning in paperwork, son, but by the end of the year, you'll be the owner of a business. How about *that* as a catch?"

Dazai's smile is slow to appear, but once he feels it, it's unstoppable.

So close.

He's so close to having it all.

Chuuya feels like he's going to throw up.

It doesn't make sense for him to be so nervous. Technically, they've been through all of the stages before.

They kissed. They had sex. Dazai even met his parents. Dazai said the words, and yes, okay, Chuuya still has to say them back, but considering everything they've been through, it shouldn't be that big of a deal anymore, right?

No, wrong.

So wrong.

He's about to shit his fucking pants.

Chuuya checks his phone. Ten minutes. This is awful.

Eyes squeezing shut, he tries to remember whether he felt like this with Romaine? Was he this nervous? Like the world only stopped and ended with this one thing, this one person?

Not that he remembers.

After that fucker cheated, most of their memories became tainted, that betrayal stealing every laugh and smile they ever shared. So even if it's hard to imagine now, hard to compare someone like Romaine to Dazai. Maybe back then Chuuya felt just like this.

Stretching out his legs, Chuuya stares at the ceiling. *Ten minutes have never felt longer.*

Dazai glances at his watch. There's still an hour left, but he plans to stop by a bakery before driving to the airport, pick up a box of custom-made *paris-brest*s. Chuuya's favorites. His father slaps another pile of documents on the desk. "Your calendar better be free for the next two days. This will take a while."

Riiiiight.

"My calendar will be empty," Dazai tells him, "as soon as I'm back from my vacation. You got that notice, yes? I saw your assistant leave the papers on your desk."

"That was before you became a business owner, Dazai. A fucking vacation can wait." *So. close.* "And you're not talking about going on vacation with that au pair boy at our house, are you?"

The taste of fear and Gen'emon Tsushima have always, always come in a package. Over the years, Dazai has learned to forget it's still there, always lingering in the back of his breastbone, but sometimes, at moments like this, the feeling of dread that rolls through him is so powerful, he almost chokes on it.

"Why are you asking?" Dazai wants to know.

Gen'emon rolls his eyes. "Because you shouldn't associate yourself with people like that. Especially not if you want to make it as something in this world." Dazai's entire throat goes dry. "I saw him wearing a skirt a few days ago. Seriously, I don't know what Mariko was thinking when she hired him." He shakes his head. "Letting him work with the kids dressed like that."

Dazai can handle every blow his father could ever give him, every insult or intoxicated punch, but this — this he isn't sure he can handle.

"He's ten thousand times better with the kids than I am."

His father blows out a brow. "Then learn a thing or two from him. Just

not too much."

So fucking close.

"He hasn't been trying to pull anything funny on you, right? Because I swear, I heard Fumiko tell me something about a birthday trip."

If Dazai so much as breathes wrongly, his father might come to a few very dangerous conclusions, and if there's anything that's worth losing for, it's this.

Keep Chuuya out of it. Keep him as far away from Gen'emon as possible.

(How didn't he realize this sooner?)

"Well, I made a joke about going with him," Dazai forces his mouth to smirk cruelly, “but I think he didn't quite grasp my humor. I actually had plans with Ranpo-san and Kunikida-kun."

His father nods, not approvingly but probably happy to hear that Dazai is not planning to go anywhere with the au pair boy that sometimes wears skirts. "Well, postpone it. We’ve got things to do."

"Consider it canceled. A worthy sacrifice,” Dazai drawls.

Gen'emon dives into technicalities, and it's at this moment, high up above in his father’s office that Dazai realizes he can't have both.

He can't have Chuuya and this.

He never was going to.

He just deluded himself and Chuuya into thinking he *could*.

It's been forty minutes.

Dazai's humor can be morbid at times. Chuuya's used to that, but being intentionally late just because Chuuya told him yesterday not to be isn't really that funny.

They have a fucking flight to catch.

It's not funny.

"Damn it, Dazai," he mutters; his fingers tremble as he presses the

phone to his ear for the twentieth time today. "Pick up. Just pick u—"

"Hello?"

Chuuya's anger bleeds into confusion, then checks whether he's even calling the right number because the voice isn't *Dazai's*.

It's definitely Dazai's number, though.

"Sorry," he says, "did you find this phone?"

"That depends on your definition of finding —" The speaker breaks off into giggles — they sound drunk, Chuuya thinks. There are muffled noises of music and shouting in the background. "A little birdie gave it to me!"

"Was it a guy named Dazai?"

"Mm, that sounds pretty familiar."

"Tall, dark-haired, handsome?"

"Oh yes! That's him!"

"Can I please speak to him?"

"Ohhh," the speaker slurs, "tough luck, stranger. He took my friend home, like, five minutes ago."

Something in Chuuya's chest shatters.

"Two friends, actually!" the person on the other end exclaims. "Wait, no, three! Looks like someone has big plans haha!"

Chuuya hangs up before they can say anything else, shoving the phone into the pocket of his jacket.

"This is the final boarding call for passengers of the 372A. Please proceed to gate 3 immediately. The final checks are being completed, and the captain will order for the doors of the aircraft to close in approximately five minutes."

Chuuya rolls the stray roses between his fingers before tossing them into the closest garbage can.

"I repeat. This is the final boarding call for passengers of flight 372A."

Grabbing his things, he gets in line behind three guys that don't look much older than him. He wipes away one stray tear.

And this is how it ends.

Chapter End Notes

> What gets up always gotta come down :/ I wish all of you the best of luck for this part of the story my friends! As always, I'm super thankful for your comments and kudos <3 You guys are very sweet!

Chapter 21: Liquid Courage

Chapter Notes

Warnings:
- alcohol!

"— out. All of you."

Opening his eyes feels like wading through muddy water. Dazai groans a little under his breath when the first blinding rays of light hit him, intensifying the heavy throbbing of his skull.

"Geez," someone mutters next to him. "Are you his girlfriend or something?"

"I'm much worse." That sounds a lot like Akiko's voice. The world spins as Dazai sits up, wobbling unsteadily and reaching for the bottle of water on his nightstand. "I'm serious. Get the fuck out. Now."

“Pfft, first last night, and now this?”

“No offense, but all of you are really *lame*.”

"Fine. All right, all right!"

The water runs down his throat like heroin. Akiko escorts the strangers out of his room in the background, her voice too loud and too drilling for his pounding headache. There are three of them. Two brunettes and one with pink hair. Dazai has no idea what their names are. All he knows is that he settled for the first group of girls he could find last night.

After a few minutes, the voices in his apartment recede, only the sound of Akiko's high heels echoing through the empty space before she appears in the doorframe. She looks like she's either about to cut him into twenty pieces with her nails alone or check him into rehab. It makes Dazai muster up a cold, bitter smile.

"Just like old times, huh?"

Akiko doesn't return it. "You know, I will always have your back no matter what happens, but —" She raises her hand, forming a fist. "But right now, your face evokes homicidal urges in me."

Dazai looks away, watching his hand tremble in his lap. "Kouyou told you."

"No, I was there when he called her."

Oh.

The bed dips, and Akiko appears in his field of vision again, her eyes burning into him. "What happened? And no bullshiting, Dazai. Everyone with a pair of eyes could see that you were head over heels, so what the fuck is wrong with you?"

Dazai lies down again. If he's going to do this, he doesn't need to see his best friend judging him. "My father approved of the bar."

Akiko doesn't say anything waiting for him to continue.

Scrubbing a hand over his face, Dazai sighs. "And he made a few comments. About Chuuya."

"He didn't find out, did he?"

"No, and that's the point. He'd kill Chuuya if he did. He can't find out. Not ever."

"He wouldn't actually —"

"Maybe not, but my father would ruin his life. Take away every opportunity and chance. He'd bury Chuuya."

Akiko clicks her tongue. "You were living with the same risk for the past months. How was that any different?"

It wasn't. Dazai can see that now but back then — fuck, not even twenty-four hours ago —

He was blind. So completely blind that he fooled himself into thinking that somehow it could turn out all right. Whenever there was talk of being blinded by love, Dazai always assumed people were talking about not seeing the flaws of the person you're in love with, but the truth is that you actually become blind to everything else.

Dazai wanted this one thing so much that for a while, he forgot that his father would never let it happen while he was still alive. Then at the worst possible moment ever, Dazai remembered. Suddenly the dread that has been living with him his entire life was all he could see. It overshadowed everything else.

"I don't know," Dazai murmurs and glances at Akiko, her brows tugged together in a skeptical scowl. "Guess I didn't want to see it. It was easier to pretend otherwise."

"Okay, so," Akiko shakes her head, clearly not any brighter, "you're protecting both of you. Why not just tell him that? He would have understood."

Dazai's stomach twists with a sickening lurch, and he has to take several deep breaths not to empty his entire stomach all over the bed.

"That's just it," he finally murmurs when his surroundings stop spinning. "Chuuya would have *understood*, and then he would have offered to wait. Or to try anyway. Secretly. He would have fought for us."

Out of all the things to weigh down on him, this is the heaviest truth.

Chuuya would have understood.

But Dazai didn't need him to understand. He needed to make sure Chuuya would never become his father's target. The only way to do that was to carve him out of his life with his own fingernails and smother any chance they ever had of being together. Of starting an actual relationship.

"You did it on purpose," Akiko realizes out loud.

Dazai looks away.

"You made him hate you just so he'd stay away."

Not showing up would have been enough to hold off any other person, but Chuuya's stubborn. Somehow, he'd have found a way to fix it. To keep the fire alive.

So Dazai thought of the one thing even Chuuya wouldn't forgive. The one thing that would kill the flame once and for all — even if he only *thinks* Dazai did it. It's still enough to make him stay away.

He startles when Akiko punches his shoulder, not having expected it. "Ow..."

"You stupid asshole," she snaps. "This is the dumbest thing I have ever heard in my entire life."

"It's smart," Dazai says and rubs the spot with a glare. "Chuuya hates

me now. He'll never forgive me for what I did. My father won't find out. Everything works out."

Everything except for...

Them.

"What about *you*?" Akiko asks.

"What about me?"

"You're just going to give up on yourself? On the things you want? You're going to spend the rest of your life shoved into a closet?"

Dazai's jaw clenches. "Yes, Kiko. Being my father's bitch has actually always been my dream."

"I'm sorry," she says with a sigh, rubbing her forehead. "I didn't mean it like that."

"I'm glad that your family likes Kouyou. I am. Unfortunately, the only way I am ever going to get out of the closet is with a fist to my face and an empty bank account."

"You know you'd still have friends who'd support you."

Yes, he's aware of that, but being dependent on his friends isn't his dream either. Dazai just wants to be free. And if that means working with his father for a few more years until the bar is enough to make him financially independent of that man... then he's going to do it.

He miscalculated before. He thought he could have both. His own kingdom and Chuuya. It turns out he doesn't.

And Chuuya even told him. He said this would happen, and still, Dazai didn't listen because nothing mattered more than the bombs going off inside him back then, but now he knows it would have ruined them both in the long run. To hold onto something that isn't sustainable.

Too bad Dazai realized too late. Way too late.

"I know," he tells Akiko, then swallows, words wavering on his tongue. "Do you know... how he's doing?"

Did he call someone to pick him up from the airport? Did he fly by himself? Did he —

"Oh no," Akiko huffs, "I'm not to telling you anything."

"Picking your girlfriend's side over your best friend?" Dazai tsks sarcastically. "That's low."

"That has nothing to with Ozaki. If you want to know how Chuuya's doing so badly, ask him yourself." She tosses her phone to him. "And apologize. Tell him about that grand, idiotic plan of yours, and maybe, if you're lucky, he'll have enough space in his heart to forgive you."

Dazai ignores the phone and turns to his side, closing his eyes. "My idea will never leave this room, Akiko." His best friend is clever, but the lines of loyalties are blurred now that she's in a relationship, so he adds, "Kouyou doesn't get to hear a word about it."

"You're an asshole."

"I never forced you to be my friend."

"You do realize that you're making the worst mistake of your life, right?"

"Remember who held back your hair after your tequila fiascos."

Akiko most likely rolls her eyes, but at last, he hears her leave the room.

Yes.

It feels like he's making the worst mistake of his life.

It has felt like that the moment he walked into a bar instead of driving to the airport.

But this is temporary.

And someday... someday it will be worth it.

After more than a decade of being friends with Dazai Osamu, hardly anything can faze Yosano anymore, but this... this has to be one of the dumbest things he has ever done.

Not only dumb but *heart-breaking*.

Because he's hurting, she knows he is; he has been for a long time now, and as much as she wished she had the power to, Yosano can't

take that pain away.

At least, not the pain itself.

However, she might be able to do something, anything, against the one causing it, even if it means going up against a business mogul, a friend of her own parents, and her best friend's father. Probably not the brightest idea either, but Yosano will not sit back and watch as Dazai shreds himself into a billion little pieces for a man that will never be satisfied with what's in front of him.

Not again.

Because men like Tsushima Gen'emon never are. They take and take and take, and when you have nothing left to offer, they toss you away like a piece of trash and find the next person to break.

And Yosano can't have another repeat of this morning. Waking up to Kouyou listening to Chuuya cry on the other end of the line. She might have had her problems with the boy, but that's because she saw Dazai falling harder and harder for him every day. Yosano never wanted to hear Chuuya try and fail to hold back his tears as he recounted being left at the airport, completely alone. Never *that*.

So walking out of Dazai's building, she calls the number of the one guy who could outsmart just about anyone in this city — in this country even. It rings two times before he picks up.

"Ranpo-san," she greets, "what do you say about teaming up for a little scheme?"

His father wasn't lying when he said he'd be quite busy for a while. Dazai spends a few days revising logistics, discussing numbers, and talking to people about this and that. He'd like to say that it keeps him distracted, but the reality is a tad more pathetic than that.

Every day he grows more tired. Every day he wakes up a little dimmer. Every day he comes home, and all the steps he's taken towards his own future feel worthless because all he wants is to talk to the one person that he cut out of his life himself.

But it's the direction he has chosen, and he can't turn back anymore.

The temptation is big, but Dazai doesn't cave. He doesn't contact Chuuya. He doesn't even save his number once he acquires a new

phone. He doesn't go to Chuuya's Instagram to see whether he posted anything — even if his thumb hovers over his profile. (He simply deletes the app altogether.)

The only thing Dazai knows is that a week has passed. Chuuya turned nineteen six days ago.

Whether he went by himself or returned home alone, the trip was supposed to end yesterday. And in a few days, there's a 99% chance that they will meet at the brunch honoring his father's new foundation.

"Here you are, darling. I was already thinking of excuses to offer to your family." Before Dazai can even bother opening his mouth, Akiko grabs the glass in his hands and sniffs at it, then turns her blazing glare on him. "Really? It's *ten* in the morning."

"It's liquid courage," Dazai says and steals back his drink.

Her gaze softens only ever so slightly. "Maybe you shouldn't have come up with such an idiotic plan if you're so nervous to see him. Or, you know, maybe if you had apologized like a human being..."

"I'm not going to explain myself again." He takes another hearty sip when she links her arm with his, dragging him away from the abandoned bar and into the crowd. "It's not just him. I passed your girlfriend earlier, and she almost cut me in half with her heel."

"Mm," Akiko hums without any compassion whatsoever, "you probably shouldn't try talking to her for the next, let's say, five years."

"I wasn't planning to either."

It's not that Dazai particularly cares whether Kouyou can stand the sight of him or not. He's lived his school years being loathed by her and a dozen other people, and he was perfectly fine with it. Yet somehow, a part of him hoped he'd be past that now. In less than a few months, he'll open his own bar. He's an adult. He's supposed to be mature. But as Dazai was walking through the grand ballroom earlier, he noticed a few of his friends side-eyeing him because, apparently, what happened between him and Chuuya did its rounds.

He's not surprised. Chuuya is liked. Maybe even more than him. That not only never bothered him, but made Dazai happy because Chuuya *likes* people. A little, social, sometimes grumpy, butterfly. It's just...

exhausting to be stuck in this endless cycle.

"When all of this is over," Akiko says, "you owe me a trip to the Bahamas. I can't even sit with my girlfriend today because of you."

Dazai huffs out a breath. "I'm not keeping you here."

"And you know I'm not leaving you alone."

"You just want to stay by my side to keep me from causing trouble."

Akiko shrugs innocently. "You started your morning with rum, babe. Can you blame me?"

Not really.

"I'm not planning on starting anything, I..." He trails off. So far, he's managed to keep his eyes straight ahead as they weaved their way through the morning crowd, pointedly ignoring every shade of bright and ginger, even hoping for a small miracle that involves Chuuya staying home.

That wish bursts like a bubble when he sees Chuuya entering the dining hall on the other side of the room. It's far enough to keep a healthy distance between them but still close, too close and sudden and shocking, and not only that but —

Akiko forcefully drags him forward and into the queue for the buffet. "*This* is why I'm here."

"Who was that guy next to him?"

Because Chuuya isn't alone. He's talking to some white-haired guy Dazai has never seen before, which means he's not someone from here.

"I have nothing to say about that," Akiko mutters as she eyes the bagels in front of her.

Translation: she can't say anything about it because Kouyou told her not to, which means it's someone relevant enough to even be mentioned.

Dazai moves to turn again, but Akiko yanks him back, pointing her chopstick at him. "You said you can't have him in your life, so stop trying to find out what's going on in his."

That's true, of course, but it doesn't ease the pressure around his ribcage. The thing Dazai hates most is not knowing. Being in the dark. Out of the fucking loop.

"I am planning on sticking to my own words," Dazai finally tells her as he fills his plate with food just for the sake of filling it, "but you do have to tell me *something*. Unless you want me to go find out myself."

"Fine. Just —" They leave the buffet, heading towards a free table near his family. "His name is Sigma, and they met on that trip. That's all I know. Are you happy? Does it make you feel better?"

Dazai sits down and takes a sip of his rum-coke.

Nope.

It doesn't make him feel any better at all.

If anything, it makes him feel worse. What exactly does *they met* mean? They shared a cocktail and exchanged numbers? They shared *a bed* and exchanged numbers? Or they... —

Dazai downs the rest of his drink in one go, ignoring the dramatic look of disappointment on Akiko's face.

"Don't you dare get another one," she hisses when he slams the glass back down.

Dazai's mouth curves into a bitter half-smile. "You're offering to go then? Lovely. Thank you so much, Kiko."

"The only thing you're getting from me anytime soon is the number of a therapist."

"Been there, done that. The man had to get therapy himself afterwards."

Akiko rolls her eyes and shows him exactly how much she appreciates his humor by stabbing her fried egg with delicate but lethal precision. "This isn't funny, Dazai," she snaps. "Don't sabotage the thing you already idiotically gave up Chuuya for."

Right.

As much as Gen'emon loves a glass of bourbon, he wouldn't appreciate Dazai making a drunken scene. He is a man that wants his people to jump through burning hoops but never wants to see the blisters they

leave behind.

"All right." Dazai lets out a deep sigh, pillows his chin on his intertwined hands. "You win this time."

Akiko replies with a bloodthirsty smile.

There's a short speech, goody bags for all the visitors, and then Dazai gets swept into tiresome but necessary conversations. Ever since he first spotted Chuuya, his skin has been buzzing with adrenaline, even though he does not plan to ambush him at any point today.

He *doesn't*... but Dazai finds himself alone for a few seconds, and Chuuya is right there, several tables away, still talking to the same guy, and well. Dazai's feet move on their own. He gets about ten steps in before he's met with none other than Kouyou Ozaki, the bewilderingly protective gleam in her eyes enough to confirm that she knows exactly where he's headed.

Out of courtesy, Dazai smiles, but his tone isn't nice. "Get out of my way."

"Not happening," she says easily, "unless you want to fight me, in which case," her shoulders lift in a shrug, "I don't have anything to lose. I'm not sure you can say the same."

Blowing out a heavy breath, Dazai looks past her and at Chuuya, who should have noticed by him, only a few feet separating them, but didn’t because he's staring straight ahead.

Chuuya knows. Of course, he knows; he just doesn't want to look.

Dazai doesn't understand what kind of masochistic devil is driving him to approach Chuuya anyway. His father is sipping champagne here somewhere. Dazai has absolutely nothing to say to Chuuya. And yet —

And yet.

"He doesn't want to see you," Kouyou's voice cuts in, "and a few dozen other people don't want you to see him either, and frankly, I'm surprised you're not aware of this already."

Dazai's gaze flickers back to her. "He said that?"

A pair of narrowed eyes glare back at him.

"What do you think? You left him alone. On his birthday. You —"

"All right, I get it. I didn't ask you to recount events."

"— made your fucking bed. *Now lie in it.*"

As her voice pitches, several heads turn their way.

Even Chuuya's.

Dazai was prepared to see a lot of things. Contained anger. A hateful glare. Maybe even a fist in his face.

Not this.

The utter lack of any emotions on Chuuya's face as their eyes finally meet. So cold and empty before he turns away from him and to someone else as if nothing ever happened.

Not *this.*

Fingers wrap around his arm, and Akiko's voice filters through the freezing fog clouding his brain. "— should go now."

Even as Kouyou's glare remains stoic, Dazai can see the crinkle of softness reserved just for Akiko. It only makes his head spin that much harder as he lets his best friend diffuse the situation and lead them away, like so many times before, like she'll always do.

"I think I'm going to throw up," he announces, voice croaking, once they're a fair way off.

Akiko's grasp around him never wavers. "I'll hold your hair."

"Are you sure you don't want to leave?"

"Yeah."

"You haven't touched your food since…. him."

Chuuya rolls his eyes and pointedly ignores the plate of cookies Sigma shoves towards him. "You can say his damn name. I'm not going to break into fucking tears."

He's pretty sure that all of his tears have been used up already for the remainder of his year in Japan. He has done enough crying. And now everything that's left is...

Chuuya doesn't know what exactly is left.

"You haven't touched your food since you saw Dazai," Sigma says, apparently taking it as a literal challenge, "and I distinctly remember hearing you say how hungry you were less than ten minutes ago."

Chuuya replies with a flat stare.

Sigma cocks one brow.

"Remind me to never bring you anywhere ever again," Chuuya mutters, though the smile hiding underneath betrays him. He's known Sigma for little more than a week now, but fuck, those five days in Mount Fuji that he spent in a drunken haze dragged on for ages, so it feels way longer.

Looking around the ballroom, Sigma's mouth pulls into a grimace. "I'll survive not coming back."

Chuuya hums as he leans back in his chair. He'd like to say the same. That what happened, what Dazai did, wiped clean all the attachments he's formed here, cut through the strings between him and this world.

It didn't.

They just come with more baggage now, ones that drag him so far down, Chuuya can barely see the light bouncing off the surface.

And it's all Dazai's fucking fault, and —

Chuuya forces out a smile, not sure whether he even had something to reply with. Whether it's because Sigma can tell or because it's believable enough, he doesn't add more to the topic. Kouyou comes back, grumbling about this and that, though she too avoids saying Dazai's name like the plague. All of his friends' efforts are useless because Chuuya's thoughts return to him, like a moth drawn to the flame, anyway.

That look.

Those eyes.

And just one fucking question that has been echoing through Chuuya's head like a name shouted in the mountains, ever since he hung up in the airport.

Why.

Why bother making Chuuya face his feelings? Why make all these promises if he was always going to break them anyway? Why? Why go through all that trouble. *Why the fuck*.

Chuuya lets out a breath and glances around the room, looking for someone that's not even there anymore. It seems to be all he does these days. Chasing things that are no longer in reach. Letting himself fall only to land on the cold, hard ground. He doesn't want to keep returning to this fucking question and wallow in self-pity. He's been there a year ago after the accident. He's been there the entire duration of his trip. It's not useful. Fuck, not helpful at all because everything in him protests at the idea of being the kind of person to break because of some guy, but —

It's just one thing too many.

And not *some* guy either.

It's the person Chuuya went against every single one of his instincts. He trusted Dazai; he trusted him to catch him and —

Dazai didn't.

He just... left.

Chuuya doesn't speak much, not having the energy to participate in any conversation, only making sure that the kids behave. His friends let him for the most part. Kouyou's philosophy is tough love. She would start a brawl in Chuuya's honor, but she will also tell him to get the fuck up and fake it when it's time. He does make use of all the free mimosas going around, making him not only slightly tipsy but in desperate need of a bathroom not even twenty minutes later. Since Kouyou offers to keep an eye on Gin and Ryuu, Chuuya drags Sigma along, his eyes involuntarily scanning the entire ballroom.

Dazai must have left already.

Good.

"— ould I tell him that you're coming?"

Chuuya blinks as they round the corner. "Hah?"

"Nikolai," Sigma replies, shoving his hands into the pockets of his grey jumpsuit. "Party. He told me to tell you. Do you want to come?"

To be more precise, Nikolai and Fyodor, both Russian, were the two other guys he met on the trip — on the flight. Apparently, Chuuya looked so upset, they decided that small talk would make him feel better. It didn't, but when they happened to stay at the same resort as him, Chuuya figured spending the days with someone would be better than to spend them completely alone.

Nikolai is an eccentric and loud personality. Fyodor is the complete opposite. Not a man of many words. Incredibly sharp. Observant. Out of the three of them, he got closest to Sigma, but the other two are okay, too. Entertaining to be around, at least.

"I'm going to pass," Chuuya murmurs anyway, feeling tired at the mere thought of going out. To be honest, he would prefer to stay in bed and only come out again until everything stops feeling so... heavy. "But have fun."

"Are you sure?"

Not really. Chuuya could probably use some distraction, but he needs another week. A little bit more time to stop feeling so fucking miserable.

"Yeah."

Sigma doesn't look entirely convinced when he reaches for the door of the bathroom, but before he can say anything, the door opens, and —

Chuuya's entire body locks as he stares back at Dazai, not even noticing Yosano behind him until she shoves herself out of the bathroom and offers him an apologetic smile. "Hey, Chuuya-kun." She tugs at Dazai's wrist. "Come on—"

"Chuuya."

Chuuya's eyes fall closed at that voice. That fucking voice.

"No." It's not him who says that, though. Not Yosano, either. Sigma is in front of him, basically shielding him and wrapping gentle fingers around Chuuya's arm. Like Dazai is some sort of villain. It's a strange way to think of him when not even two weeks ago, Chuuya was ready to throw away every instinct and fear just to give the villain in question a shot — except that Dazai took it literally and fired a bullet.

"Come on, Chuuya," he hears Sigma say more quietly. "You don't have to talk to him."

The thing is that he wants to anyway.

Despite everything, he still fucking wants to.

Because Dazai is here. Within a hand's reach. And his eyes flash murderously at Sigma's interjection. It's not the look of someone who was only toying with Chuuya the whole time. It's not.

"I—" Chuuya shakes his head at himself and swallows down the fucking pain, trying to remember the wuthering, staggering anger instead. It's so much easier to drown in *that* rather than trying to stay above the surface, fighting for one useless breath after another.

His stare bleeds into a venomous glare, mirroring the way Dazai looked at Sigma just now. He doesn't say anything, though. He forces himself to turn away and let Sigma drag them both inside the bathroom.

The thud of the door echoes through the room.

Chuuya staggers forward and turns on the faucet, angrily wiping at his eyes. He's not going to fucking cry. Not again. *Not because of him.*

Sigma's a quiet but reassuring presence, rubbing his back and offering him a tissue when Chuuya lifts his head again, chest rising with short, shallow breaths. "On second thought," Chuuya murmurs with a thick, traitorous voice, "I need to get fucking drunk. Tell Gogol I'm in."

Chapter 22: Just a Game

Chapter Notes

Happy 100k words!!! <3

Yokohama never sleeps, especially not at night, but inside the vacant, unpainted walls of Dazai's future, silence reigns.

These days, he prefers to work here, his bar, instead of his penthouse.

Every piece of furniture, every spot, and corner holds too many vivid memories of Chuuya, and Dazai gets much more done when his thoughts aren't held hostage by events that cannot be undone anymore. The first thing, Dazai's going to do when this project turns profitable is move out of there. Too many reminders. Too big for only one person. (And it will always be only him. Alone.) Just another string that ties him to his father, that makes Dazai dependant on him. Once it's possible, he will cut it off and never look back again.

The image of the future makes Dazai sigh. He picks up his glass to take a sip of scotch, letting the liquor linger on his tongue before swallowing it down and returning his gaze to the numbers at hand. He gets through two pages before his thoughts begin to wander again. To Chuuya. To the cold expression on his face when he looked at him. To that guy next to him. Sigil. Signal. Sigmund. Whatever.

They could be mere friends, of course, but there was that protective gleam in his gaze when he tried to steer Chuuya away from him. Dazai can recognize it because *he* used to feel the same way about Chuuya. He still does. Perhaps Chuuya brought him along to make Dazai jealous.

Not a bad tactic, considering Dazai did the same not too long ago. So if that was the plan behind it, it worked. Nonetheless, as much as Dazai's nerves pulse to react, he can't.

His fingers unconsciously drift to his wallet and the two pictures he keeps there. He twists the tiny photographs between his fingers, ones that shows them clinging to each other's lips in Paris. Back then, Dazai would have never believed that he'd be sitting here now, trying to crumple and throw away this printed memory and not managing to, no matter how much he wants to.

Another sip. He puts the picture away.

This is his future.

He glances around the basement, taking in the high ceilings and the vast room. This. This little kingdom. This piece of freedom. And until Dazai's father has no more pieces to play against him, until Dazai has no strings on him anymore, Chuuya simply can't be part of it. Maybe one day, but Dazai's sure it will be a few million light-years too late by then.

Chuuya's hand wanders to his lips and the new, sensitive piercings there.

Snake bites.

It's been two weeks since he had the fantastic idea of getting pierced, and yet he's still not entirely used to them, finding himself stopping and tracing the shape with his tongue every now and then. To be fair, it's less permanent and less impulsive than getting a tattoo.

And unlike Chuuya, Tachihara wasn't drunk when he did the job.

And it looks fucking hot. There's no need to talk around it. He looks even better now, and he refuses to dwell in regret over drunken choices.

In the other room, he hears a door open, and Chuuya finds his breath catching before Hayashi's sunny voice filters through the house.

Aside from that foundation thing, Dazai hasn't made many appearances here.

Not even on Sundays.

Radio silence.

Complete utter radio silence.

Chuuya's not sure whether the feeling stuck between his ribs is relief or disappointment. But it's *this* precise outcomethat Chuuya wanted to avoid from the start, why he hesitated to sleep with his fucking host brother in the first place, but Dazai, the bastard, made all these promises. *It will be casual.* And then it turned into *we can try dating.* Into *trust me.*

And despite it all, Chuuya still doesn't hate him. There is just something odd about the whole situation. Something that feels off.

That fucking look when Dazai saw him and Sigma. It was jealousy.

Jealousy.

And everything else about this entire situation feels weird too.

Dazai spent too much time on the two of them, too much effort for it to be only a game. Or a joke. Or god knows what.

Something, at least a little bit of it, had to be real.

Chuuya just can't figure out what the hell went wrong.

It's not like a plausible explanation would erase what Dazai did. An easy fix is not what Chuuya is looking for. He simply believes that there is more to the story.

After two-week-long alcohol cleanse and maybe a few dozen mental breakdowns, Chuuya finds that underneath all the layers of hurt and anger and disappointment, he, above all, needs the truth. Just one simple piece of truth. That's all.

He finally gets up from the couch to greet Hayashi. "Hey." When her gaze flickers towards the hallway, Chuuya adds, "they're doing homework."

Hayashi nods, then slips out of her heels and sighs loudly. "I got a call from their homeroom teacher earlier; she invited us for a *talk*."

Chuuya frowns. "They didn't mention anything earlier."

"I don't know what to expect either," she huffs, walking to the kitchen, "but we will see tomorrow."

Chuuya follows her and mentally kicks himself ten times before finally speaking up. "Hey, do you know... what Dazai has been up to lately?" Hayashi turns to him with a puzzled frown, and he feels the need to explain. "He's been busy with classes, and I haven't heard from him in a while."

"Oh. Well, Osamu doesn't talk to me as often as I'd like to. That's why I was so happy you boys got along." Chuuya bites his cheek to stop himself from visibly cringing. "I guess the bar is taking up all his time these days."

"The bar," Chuuya echoes with a puzzled frown.

Hiyashi nods enthusiastically. "A wonderful concept, don't you think? It fits him so well!"

"Yeah. It really does."

The bar. So Dazai's father approved?

Every time Chuuya brought it up after they ended things and before everything fell apart, Dazai shrugged it off and said his father was still reviewing the business plan. That it was taking time.

Apparently, it worked out in his favor.

A heavy weight wraps around Chuuya's guts and twists them around not too nicely. Once upon a time, he wanted to be the one to hear the news first. He wanted to celebrate with Dazai. Deep down, Chuuya's still happy for him, but it's bound to so much baggage that it's hard to reach.

The next day, Chuuya finds himself in front of Kouyou's ballet school.

Not because he is planning to dance today -- his ankle has been, once again, causing him trouble lately -- but because he wants to speak to Yosano, and, as busy as she is, the only sure place to find her is by her girlfriend's side.

It's funny.

The first time Yosano picked her up here, with Dazai, Kouyou insisted it wouldn't become a thing. Yet, Chuuya knows for a fact that it remained a tradition in their lives. Yosano steals her in her lunch breaks. They get food. Talk shit. *They* survived this. *They* made it. It's just Chuuya and Dazai who didn't.

Thankfully, he sees Yosano's car pull up just in time, forcing him to push away the bitter reminder and move on. When she gets out, looking like she stepped out of a Pinterest board with fishnet tights and a matching skirt and top, she tilts her head. Chuuya shoves his hands into the pockets of his hoodie and tries to smile as she comes up to him.

"And here I thought my girlfriend would be going on a date with me."

"She will," Chuuya says. "I'm here for you. I want to talk. It won't take

long, I promise."

Yosano nods, but as they walk over to the nearest bench, her nose scrunches. "Our dates are that obvious, huh?"

"You guys fell into a routine." Chuuya sits down, mouth twitching. "It's cute."

"No, it's boring. I will have to spice things up," she announces. However, when she turns to look at him, noting his piercings with a tilt of her head, her expression softens. "Talk then."

His tongue suddenly feels like lead, heavy and impossible to move. And he is ridiculous. "You're his best friend," he finally gets out. "You must know what went wrong, right?" Chuuya didn't mean to sound so pathetically desperate, and yet every word that comes out of his mouth sounds like a plea. "I just need the truth, Yosano-san. That's all."

Because something must have happened.

Something that turned Dazai -- the person that tucked Chuuya into his chest to warm him up on cold nights, and rubbed his back, and never, not for even one second, hesitated before flying to Paris with him even if it would cost him -- into someone that would not only leave Chuuya alone at the airport but also sleep with some drunk strangers he picked up somewhere. Do the thing that Chuuya confided in him about fearing the most. Dazai knew how much it had hurt him then, and then he slept with someone else anyway.

It can't be the same person.

Chuuya couldn't have been so blind all this time, could he?

To her credit, Yosano doesn't even bat an eyelash. Then again, she probably expected the question.

"I can't tell you anything Dazai hasn't already said to you."

"But that's the thing," Chuuya snaps. "He hasn't told me shit. The last time I talked to him, we were planning to meet at the airport, and then --" He cuts his hand through the air at the memory of hearing some drunk girl say that Dazai went home with her friends.

Friends.

And he realizes why it took him so long to even ask. Because talking about it to Yosano, to someone who knew them, someone who could tell him the truth, could say to him the one thing he doesn't want to hear --

Because it hurts. Talking about it hurts like shit.

"Then he did a 180," Chuuya finishes in a murmur, chest sagging with the weight squeezing around his lungs, pulverizing him from the inside out. "It's been almost a month, and he never tried to contact me. Not even once."

"Have you tried to talk to him?"

"No."

Yosano looks at him as if to say *see,* as if *he* was supposed to reach out first when *Dazai* was the one that fucked him over. A flash of irritation bolts through him. He knows she'll always be Dazai's friend first and foremost, but this isn't just loyalty; it's ignorance.

"He fucked up," Chuuya snaps. "If there's something he has to say, then he should reach out."

"But it's you who wants the truth," Yosano points out not too kindly.

Well, Chuuya can't deny that even if he doesn't like it.

"I understand you, darling, I do, but this is Dazai. And Dazai is…" She shrugs hopelessly because, yeah, simple words will never be enough to describe the complex system that goes by his name. "... Dazai. I think you know that better than most people."

Chuuya scrubs a hand across his face. "You really won't tell me anything?"

"No," she replies, and as if to make her point, she gets up, dusting off invisible specks of dirt off her skirt. "What I can offer you is my humble opinion, and that is, that I like your spirit." Chuuya frowns up at her. "You don't give up easily, Chuuya-kun. You're stubborn. Keep it that way." She leaves him with these words.

Chuuya's not any less clueless than before, but Yosano did give him something. She never denied that there is more to the truth.

She never shot down the idea that something happened to change

Dazai's mind. She even told him to not give up. It's something, right?

It's everything.

The universe is trying to tell him to stop, Chuuya thinks as droplets of water fall all over the floor of the elevator.

The universe is sending him gigantic, glowing neon signs that tell him *don't fucking do it* in the form of a literal storm, but Chuuya? Just as Yosano said, he is stubborn.

So when the doors slide open with a deep hum, he doesn't stay inside. He gets out. He walks down the familiar marble hallway, a path that he used to walk every day not too long ago. And he forces himself to lift his hand and ring the doorbell even as his rapid-fire pulse roars in his ears.

Nothing happens for a while.

This was a stupid idea.

Dazai probably isn't even home. His schedule must have changed in the last months. Chuuya tries again, his courage slowly seeping out of him, just like the rain that keeps dropping from his hair and jacket and face. Piece by pie--

The door opens. Chuuya's mouth parts around dying words. "I..."

Dazai looks good. Hair ruffled like he just woke up. The first few buttons of his ink-black shirt popped open, white bandages peeking through.

Dazai's eyes rake over Chuuya, stopping on his mouth -- the piercings, taking in the fact that he's completely soaked from head to toe, and wordlessly, he steps to the side. Chuuya's heart thrashes wildly inside his chest.

"You're going to cause a flood," is the first thing Dazai says. "Get inside before my neighbors get mad."

Chuuya does.

Another stupid idea. He wordlessly stands there, trying to untangle his tongue even as Dazai tugs at his jacket, signaling to get it off. In a trance, Chuuya does that too. He slips out of his shoes and peels off his wet socks. His shirt is better off. His pants not so much, but he

can't bring himself to start stripping with Dazai here.

There's only so much of his dignity that Chuuya can give him.

"Take a shower,," Dazai tells him, going to his kitchen and turning on the kettle. "I'll make you some tea."

"It's fine." Chuuya hates how rough his voice sounds. It was supposed to be a simple in and out sort of thing. Get here, get it over with, and then leave, no matter what the answer is.

"At least, get yourself a towel. You'll get sick with that wet mop on your head."

It doesn't matter, not when Chuuya's going to leave and get wet all over again, but it's useless arguing, so he once again listens.

He wishes Dazai would have gotten it because standing here, in Dazai's bathroom, his eyes can't help but immediately look for visible changes. Maybe someone else's things, even if Dazai mainly uses the bathroom attached to his room. Perhaps a new hand soap. Something. But there is nothing. Everything is still the same. Nothing has changed except for the fact that Chuuya doesn't at home here anymore.

Back in the kitchen, Chuuya rubs the towel through his hair, not allowing himself to look at Dazai yet. Instead, he looks for the same changes here, though if anything, Dazai's kitchen looks even emptier than it used to. He bets he'd find nothing but a slab of butter in the fridge if he looked inside. And despite everything, Chuuya's first instinct is to tell Dazai to take better care of himself. To worry.

"Chuuya," Dazai says then. "Don't drag it out." Dazai's voice never sounded this cold. Talking to others, yeah, but not with him.

Don't drag it out. As if Dazai had expected this conversation to happen before Chuuya ever showed up on his doorstep. Because he probably had. Because not showing up for their trip was never supposed to be the apex of their story. It's *this*.

And it feels like it's already over before it even begins.

"Okay." Chuuya places the towel on the counter and faces him. "Just tell me. Did something happen? Was it some plan to get back at me for not saying it back the first time? Or --" His breath hitches, voice tight with pain. "-- what went wrong?" Where did he, Chuuya, go wrong to end up *here*?

"I was bored." Chuuya's mouth falls shut. "I was bored, and you came along and," Dazai shrugs nonchalantly, "you were interesting to play with." Every word finds its target. Chuuya feels it everywhere. In his chest. In his throat. In the pit of his stomach. "You were amusing for a while, but I wanted to see how far I could take it. Whether I could make the impossible possible." Blow after blow. "And once I managed that...." Dazai trails off.

Once Chuuya fell, he became useless.

"All of it?" Chuuya finds himself asking, a stray tear rolling down his cheek. "Just…"

"All of it," Dazai confirms with something like pity in his voice. He looks so genuine, too. So nice.

His words are a caress of lips against Chuuya's skin as he takes the knife and plunges the knife into his heart. "It was all just a game."

More tears follow, but Chuuya nods around them. *Finally*. "Thank you."

Finally, he doesn't have to wonder anymore. Finally, he can just -- he can stop. Stop asking himself what happened. Stop trying to find something salvageable in a relationship that never existed in the first place. Stop trying so damn hard.

Dazai might be cruel, sadistic even, but in a way, he set Chuuya free, and for that, he is grateful even if it's the last thanks Dazai will ever hear from him again.

Chuuya pushes away from the counter and walks away once and for all. Dazai never attempts to stop him.

Yosano takes a sip of her cappuccino as her eyes wander over the photographs Ranpo's spreading out on the table, slurping especially hard at the most recent addition. "Business meeting, huh?"

"It wasn't." Ranpo leans back in his chair and grabs a mini muffin from the box on the table. "My sources said it was a blank spot in his calendar. Even stranger because his lunch breaks never last that long."

"Strange, indeed," Yosano murmurs.

If Tsushima Gen'emon has skeletons in his closet, then he has dug

them a deep grave. Ranpo and her have been trying to find something, anything, that would be able to topple the man that has been controlling Dazai's life for twenty-one years now, but it hasn't been easy so far. A few encrypted calls here. A few strange meetings in the middle of his day there. Nothing solid, though.

"I'm not against the idea of simply planting a pack of cocaine in his bag," she says, massaging her temple. "It would be so simple."

Ranpo shakes his head, swallowing before speaking. "Patience, Yosano-san. There isn't one powerhouse in the business that hasn't got a dirty little secret. We just have to wait."

"You don't." Ranpo is the head of Yokohama's number one news outlet. He's every inch a powerhouse as Gen'emon, or her own parents, though, for the sake of her own sanity, she would like to avoid thinking of *their* secrets.

The look she receives is so achingly familiar that Yosano can't help but smile into her coffee, realizing how much time had already passed since school, when they were all together, bound by teenage angst and an intolerable amount of hormones. "I have secrets. I'm merely not stupid enough to have ones that could ruin my career."

"Well, if that's your issue," she says with a shrug, "you don't have to help me plant the drugs."

"Don't be silly. I'd like to see that man on the ground as much as you, but..." His brows tug together, eyes squinting. It's that look. The one that says that Ranpo has a gut feeling, and he rarely is wrong. "It has to be genuine. And big."

"I know. I just --" Her hands curl. "I feel like Dazai is barely hanging on."

She didn't think it could get even worse, but Yosano can see it every time she forces Dazai to let her in. Something in him is dying away. Something that she can't fix. Whether it's his situation with Chuuya or whether it's just the overbearing presence of his father, she doesn't know. He refuses to waste any words on it, but it's time to get worried. It has been time for a while now.

The smile Ranpo offers her is small and sad because he knows what's going through her head. They've both been friends with Dazai for a long time now. "We'll just have to work harden then."

“-- didn’t like his drawing very much.”

Chuuya looks at the drawing in question. A black beast with fangs and a nasty grin, surrounded by red flames. Creative? For sure. A bit macabre? Yeah. But it’s no reason for other kids to exclude him -- and this is exactly what's been happening, according to the teacher. Gin and Ryuu have apparently been spending all their breaks by themselves. Just the two of them.

“What did they say?” Chuuya asks Gin.

Gin’s voice drops into a conspirational whisper, probably because her brother isn’t too far away from them, playing fetch with Diabolo. “That Rashomon looks stupid.”

“Rasho-?”

“Rashomon is his friend.”

“Friend?”

Gin nods enthusiastically.

“I see.”

“Can I go back to the swing now?”

“Sure, kid. Just be careful.” She hits the ground running before he can even utter the last syllable. Chuuya makes sure to keep an eye on her as he joins Ryuu instead, stealing the ball that Diabolo places in front of his feet and throwing it far, far away. If Ryuu doesn’t like it, he keeps quiet about it.

“So,” Chuuya says after a moment or two, “how is Rashomon doing?”

Ryuu’s gaze flickers to him. “Rashomon doesn’t like when other people talk about him.”

“Oh. Is he shy?”

“He just wants to be left alone.”

“You know, I used to have a friend like that, too.”

At that, Ryuu’s disinterest bleeds into mild curiosity, frowning up at Chuuya. “Really?”

“Uh-uh. His name was Arahabaki. Do you remember when I told you I was adopted? Just like you and Gin?”

Ryuu nods.

“Well, Arahabaki was the one who kept me company all these years. I had some friends, but see, I was also very… spirited.” Too much. Too loud. Too angry. “Not everyone liked that, so when I felt alone, Arahabki was there for me. He kept me safe and sound the whole time.”

Believing that a made-up monster was protecting him, that he’d keep him safe at night and chase away all the bad things was one of the few reliefs back then. The system forces you to become creative to keep going.

“What happened to A--” Ryuu scowls, stumbling over his words. “--Awabaki?”

Chuuya smiles, squatting down to pet Diabolo when he comes back with the ball, tail wagging. “My parents adopted me, and after Arahabaki made sure I was in good hands, he left and took care of another kid. One that needed him more than me.” Chuuya doesn’t mention all the times he got angry at that thing for failing to keep him safe. It was a, let’s say, bittersweet goodbye. “But I named my dog in his honor. Baki.”

For a few moments, Ryuu is silent, fidgeting with his hands before he finally looks up at Chuuya again. “Rashomon used to protect Gin and me all the time. I think he’s boring -- bored now, so I draw him pictures.”

Chuuya never lets his expression waver even as his chest falls with the sad reality of Ryuu and Gin and every other kid out there who relies on fictional monsters to keep them safe because no adult will do it for them. The world can be cruel, but the people in it even crueler.

In the corner of his eye, Gin calls for Chuuya to push her, and he turns, wincing as a dull throbbing in his leg flares up. Number eight on the list of cruel things: his damned leg, making his life difficult even after nearly two years.

Number one-hundred-and-one: Tsushima Gen’emon, whose voice is so cutting and loud when he argues with his wife that it makes even Chuuya flinch. It’s why he drags out this walk for as long as possible. Hearing their parents argue is probably not the worst thing Ryuu and

Gin must have experienced in their lives. But if Chuuya can spare them from that, he'll do it every single time.

It was a very uncomfortable conversation to listen to, even from five rooms away.

(Number two on the list: Dazai Osamu.)

Chapter 23: Tactile Mistakes

Dazai never had anything positive to feel about the picture-perfect Tsushima family estate, but today his desire not to be here escalates to new volatile levels. Even his body seems to be in tune with his mind for once. The plethora of scars littered across his skin keep itching uncomfortably, demanding his fingers to scratch until he finds something of substance under there, yet Dazai remains unmoving in his seat across from his father. Because he's not only stuck inside the house for the rest of the evening but currently inside an office where the act of acknowledging his bandages would be a tactical mistake.

Blowing out a breath, Dazai fixes his gaze on the papers in front of him. *Liquor license. Signage license. Lift clearance. A bunch of insurance papers. F—*

"For god's sake, Dazai, just sign the papers."

Dazai slowly lifts his gaze, aware of the glassy film stretched over the umber-colored eyes glaring back at him. "I seem to remember you teaching me to never sign a contract without reading it first."

"With strangers. What, you can trust your own father now?"

Dazai also remembers Gen'emon repeatedly denying that he could ever be the father of such a sensitive, rotten child, but he chooses to leave out that part. Despite the heavy weight of his father's dwindling impatience pressing down on him, he doesn't sign, not yet, taking his time instead to skim the text in front of him. Only his eyelids flinch when a scotch glass slams against the surface of the table, a dry sigh following the action.

"I work myself high and dry for this family," he hears his father say. "I busted my fucking ass to give you everything. Money. Opportunities. Contacts. I gave up so much, and this is how everyone treats me."

"Do not confuse me being thorough with your marital problems, father."

Despite not living here anymore, Dazai was unfortunately not spared hearing about the ongoing fight with Hayashi. Just yesterday, he had to listen to her complain about her husband being rude and uninterested in his own family. The whole time Dazai wondered why it took her so long to see something that has been there all along.

The moment the words leave his mouth, though, reaching his father's ears, he knows it was a mistake, though.

In one swift movement, the documents in front of him are gone, ripped away. The man wears an expression bordering on drunken ire. "You want to talk big, Dazai, go ahead. See how far you would have gotten with that half-assed proposal of yours without me." Dazai's hand unintentionally lifts to scratch at his arm. "Do you even know how lucky you are that I'm willing to fund your fantasies? Despite everything you've done to this family? To your mother?"

Dazai's mask twitches.

"Stop that!"

Stop *what*?

His father is looking at his bandages, though, an expression of disgust so vast and bottomless it's infectious. Dazai's fingers freeze. This is nothing in the grand scheme of things. Ice in the snow. And Dazai is so, so close.

"I will make it up," he says. "I will fix everything I've done wrong."

They both know that it's not possible. No amount of money and success can bring back someone from the dead, but maybe it can at least paint over all the embarrassment Dazai has put him through, put glitter and gold over the disgraceful, colorless painting that is his life.

His father only shakes his head, slapping the forms back on the table before taking a big gulp of his scotch. "Get out of my sight," he barks once Dazai is done.

Gladly.

Chuuya already knows that Dazai will be present for tonight's family dinner. Hayashi was kind enough to inform him, probably because Chuuya asked about him last time, not knowing she was doing him a great favor. However, he did not quite expect to run into him an hour before dinner, right when he was about to make his escape.

"Eh, Chuuya." The smile on Dazai's face is everything but genuine as he steadies him with a hand around his arm. "Going somewhere?"

Chuuya thanked him last time, but that was the last act of goodwill

Dazai would ever get him from, he promised himself. So now... now he can give in to the jet black downpour of hate inside his breastbone. He can loathe Dazai for the piece of manipulative shit that he is.

Chuuya yanks out of the grip with more force than necessary. “Don’t,” he hisses, “fucking touch me.”

“So much vigor,” Dazai drawls and mockingly holds a hand to his chest. “I’m terrified, really.”

The fact that he still feels the need to belittle him even after everything — after all the humiliating things Dazai has already put him through — shatters every last decent image Chuuya had of him. He doesn’t understand how he could have been so blind. How he could have been so naive.

“You grew tired of me, remember?” Chuuya snaps. “Why are you still standing here, refusing to let me through like I’m the most interesting object in the room? Are you really that bored with your life?”

He sees Dazai blow out a breath, but before the situation can escalate, the sound of Hayashi’s voice rings through the air. “Boys! I’m so glad you’re both here. The cooks are having a day off, so I’m preparing food. Will you two help me?”

Chuuya makes a face. “I’m so sorry, Hayashi-san. I was just about to head out.”

“Oh.” She frowns at him. “You’re not staying for dinner?”

“I was going to meet a friend.” As if on cue, the doorbell rings. Chuuya ignores Dazai’s eyes traveling to him (and ignores how heavy they feel), nudging his head towards the corridor. “The friend in question.”

Hayashi’s face lights up with an expression that tells him she’s up to no good. She always looks like this when she’s about to make an awful suggestion like — “Why don’t you invite your friend over for dinner? The more people, the merrier! I could use all the hands I can get.” Ironically enough, she turns to Dazai, elbowing him. “Right, Osamu?”

“If by right you mean that you’re trying to avoid talking to your husband, then yes.”

“Osamu!”

“I don’t think he’s hungry,” Chuuya mutters and takes a subtle step backward, trying to slip out of this conversation and this house as smoothly as possible. He all but sprints to the corridor, opening the door with shoes in his hands, ready to leave, but the moment Sigma’s face greets him, Hayashi’s lilting voice does, too.

Fuck.

“Come on in! My name’s Hayashi, and this is — where’s Osamu? Nevermind. Are you hungry?”

“I…” Sigma says, blinking, as Chuuya furiously mouths say no to him… “... just ate, ma’am.”

“Don’t be silly. Everyone’s hungry. And if you don’t want to eat, then you can at least help.”

“Hayashi-san—”

“Chuuya-kun. Is someone dying?”

“No…”

“Then get in.”

And that’s the final verdict. Sigma comes inside, sending him a puzzled look while Chuuya buries his face in his hands and prepares for the world’s most awful dinner.

Dazai conveniently disappears for the entire hour that Chuuya and Sigma, and eventually Gin and Ryuu, help in the kitchen. Chuuya’s almost stupid enough to believe that he has left altogether, but as soon as the table is set, Dazai is there, wearing a smug expression that doesn’t match the blank look in his eyes.

For an entire minute, Chuuya is glad about sitting between Sigma and Gin, as far away as possible from him before he looks up at the person sliding into the seat *across* from him, and that relief shatters like glass. To be fair, it’s the only spot left at the table, but nowadays, Chuuya doesn’t mind blaming everything that’s ever gone wrong in his life on Dazai.

Next to him, Sigma tenses and Chuuya wonders what he would say if he knew the entire truth instead of the random, odd pieces he heard about drunk in a hotel room in Mount Fuji. Chuuya didn’t tell him, or

anyone else for that matter, what Dazai said that night; he couldn't. It's a truth so humiliating that Chuuya thinks he'll take it to the grave.

"So," Hayashi says after a few initial minutes of silence, the calm before the storm that only waits to be broken, "Sigma, right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"How did you and Chuuya meet?"

Chuuya gulps down the piece of tofu in his throat a bit too hastily. "On my birthday trip."

"Oh, yeah, I remember," Hayashi replies, humming. "You spontaneously decided to go with another friend of yours, right?"

The *instead of Dazai* is left unsaid.

Back then, Chuuya came up with the first lie that came to his mind, which was that something had come up for Dazai, and that's why Chuuya randomly asked Tachihara to join him. (It sure sounds better than going alone.) Telling his host mother that her step-son had abandoned him at the airport without so much as a word would have caused too much confusion. As hurt as Chuuya was then, as angry as he is now, he would never intentionally out Dazai.

"Yeah, Tachihara," Chuuya provides with another nod. It's impossible not to see Dazai acting completely unfazed when he's right across from Chuuya. Like the topic of the conversation is the fucking weather. Even that stings. How someone can be so indifferent leaves Chuuya speechless, especially after the world-shattering performance he put on for the last few months. But that's all it was. An act. A game.

Hayashi lets out a long sigh after taking a sip of her red wine. "I can only dream of a vacation nowadays since my husband is too busy for anything but work."

"Fumiko," her husband says next to her, "not now."

"When then? It's not like you're constantly all over the goddamn world. Just without us."

Dazai lets out a soft chuckle against the rim of his drink, clearly amused by this situation.

“What do you have to laugh about?” Sigma suddenly mutters, making Chuuya nearly choke with shock, even if his voice is barely loud enough for the other side of the table to hear.

“Considering this is my house and my family,” Dazai retorts with a lethal glint dancing on his face, “I’m laughing about you and how much you don’t belong here.”

“Dazai,” Chuuya hisses, “shut up.”

“Your puppy here started it.”

Chuuya opens his mouth to respond, but the silence that descends over Hayashi and Tsushima's part of the table snaps his lips shut.

Hayashi clears her throat. “So Sigma. Chuuya. Where were we?”

“Hayashi-san,” Chuuya says with a pained smile, “we really don’t have to —”

“I insist!” Red dots of wine splosh through the air as she nimbly swings her glass through the air.

“I’m not going to let this wonderful dinner be ruined because my husband can’t stand to hear someone else's opinion!”

“It is already ruined,” Ryuu, of all people, remarks dryly.

His father makes a sound at that, though it only seems to aggravate Hayashi even more.

“Perhaps if you spent time with your kids, you could teach them some manners.” But the look she throws Ryuu isn’t reproachful. The opposite, actually. “It’s not ruined, honey. Just a little tense.”

“I’m so sorry,” Chuuya tells Sigma in a low whisper.

Sigma turns to him, but there’s a warmth in his expression that makes Chuuya swallow nervously. He wants to laugh, do something to drain that tension out of the air between them because he can’t even think of anything like that again, but out of fucking nowhere something sticky and liquid sploshes all over his pants. Chuuya jumps up in horror, only then noticing that the fucking wine bottle must have somehow fallen over.

“Oh, dear.” Dazai doesn’t sound sorry at all. “How did this happen?”

Not somehow. It was this fucking asshole.

“You —” Chuuya’s teeth grit in an uncontrollable urge to fling himself over the table and grab Dazai by the shoulders and wake him the fuck up. Because this isn’t Dazai. This isn’t the guy he fell in love with. This isn’t the guy that he still —

“I’m so sorry, Chuuya-kun,” Hayashi apologizes, though. “My hand must have accidentally punched the bottle.”

“It’s fine. I’ll just — I’ll just change really quickly.”

“Are you okay?” Sigma asks, already getting up.

“Sit down, Sigma-kun,” Dazai drawls. “We didn’t even get to the good stuff yet. Chuuya is a big boy; he can handle changing his pants. Right, Chuuya?”

Fuck off, Chuuya wants to snap.

“It’s fine, really,” he says instead, pressing out another forced smile before leaving the table.

Just in time, he hears Gin say, “Uh-oh, mommy. My tummy hurts.”

Chuuya’s hopelessly rubbing at his pants when the door of the laundry room cracks open. He only turns because he thinks it’s Sigma who must have followed him, after all, or maybe Hayashi with advice on getting out a nasty wine stain. Instead, he finds Dazai leaning against the doorframe.

The dizzying speed of Dazai changing faces leaves Chuuya too drained to even get angry again. Instead he just lets out a resigned sight. “What is it now?”

Dazai stretches out his hand, a pair of Chuuya’s favorite jeans dangling between his fingers. “Hayashi sent me to help you. Sigmund doesn’t know your room and where you keep your things as well as I do.”

“His name is Sigma, asshole.” Chuuya yanks the pants out of his hands. “Hayashi must have missed that you —” he steps into them, refusing to even look in Dazai’s direction as he does. “— were the one who spilled wine over me in the first place.”

“I didn’t.”

“Yeah, right.”

“I have my flaws, Chuuya, but I also have a certain image to uphold in front of my dear father. It was a genuine accident caused by flailing hands and Hayashi’s drunk temper.”

Chuuya turns to the washing machine, stuffing his stained pants into the load before turning around. “Give me one good I should believe even one single word.” Dazai only gazes at him in loud silence. “Yeah. That’s what I thought.”

“I suppose you make a valid point.”

In the face of Dazai’s quiet defeat, all the raw anger under Chuuya’s skin bleeds into oppressive exhaustion. Hating him is so hard. Harder than loving him ever was.

“Leave me alone,” he ends up murmuring. “You’ve done enough.”

And, at least, for a few hours, Dazai does.

May bleeds into June with ruthless vigor, so that one morning, Chuuya wakes up half-hanging off his bed, a stabbing headache in the back of his skull from one too many glasses of vodka at Fyodor’s place, and realizes that half of his au pair year has already passed by.

September means so much more than just flying home, though.

It means decisions and endings and goodbyes and getting his shit together. It means something new and —

And Chuuya has been trying very hard to avoid thinking about any of these things.

His phone buzzes with a new message in the group chat. The one with Dazai in it. Another thing he has been neglecting. Chuuya doesn’t even read it before swiping it away. It’s not like he doesn’t like any of them anymore. Fuck, he still remembers how excited he was about the possibility of having a friend group so open and casual. But crossing paths with Dazai because of them is simply not worth it. They’re a part of his world, and Chuuya’s trying his best to stay as far away as possible from that.

With maximum effort, he forces himself to get up and shuffle to the bathroom to brush his teeth. He winces at the sight of his red,

splotchy skin. He should start drinking more water instead of liquor, but sadly water doesn't dull pain as well as vodka does.

When he returns to his bed, flopping down like a tired cow that has given up on eating grass, there are more texts on his phone. A few of them are from Sigma, talking about tonight's plans. The other ones are from Yosano.

Y: you do know you're included when we make plans, right?

Chuuya sighs and rolls onto his back.

C: i guess

Y : So you're coming tonight?

From what he has glimpsed in the texts he pointedly did not read, she's referring to a party on a yacht in the bay area.

C: i already have plans

C: i'm sorry :(

Y: bullshit

C: i swear

Y: then cancel your plans

C: i can't just ditch my friends

Even as he types the words, the irony of these words elicits a fresh swell of acrid bitterness on his tongue.

Y: then take your friends with you

Y: I've wanted to meet them anyway

C: idk…

Y: nobody would say no free drinks???

C: i guess

C: is dazai going to be there

Y: will you agree to come if i say no

C: maybe

Y: it's not sure yet.

Y: but you can't avoid him forever

Y: Jesus you live with his family ???

C: that's precisely why i don't want to see him

Y: you're tragic

Y: dazai might show up but it's not clear yet, but I'll be expecting you anyway

Y: all the info is in the GC. toodles

Chuuya tosses his phone across his bed and buries his face in the bedsheets.

Great.

With that fucking party in mind, getting on about his day feels like prolonging the inevitable. Sigma and co. don't seem to mind the change in plans, though they do make a few jokes about partying with people that "have a stick up their ass." Chuuya doesn't bother to correct them because they'll see that the people they're about to meet are anything but prude bores.

He's made a point of spending time with Gin and Ryuu, even outside his work hours, ever since their teacher informed Hayashi about their lack of friends in school. Kids can be fucking mean.

That age is hard enough as it is, so if playing the Sims with Gin or listening to Ryuu talk about his friend Rashomon gives them some sort of relief from childhood hardships, then Chuuya doesn't mind.

He's been going out every evening, too.

Although he knows by now that Hayashi is pretty open-minded (and Gen'emon not often enough home to condemn his coming and going), Chuuya feels a bit bad. After all, it is his au pair year, and not just twelve months of partying and making bad decisions.

Today, he helps Gin with some of the ballet movements she has been struggling with, according to Kouyou. He pushes the armchair and coffee table out of the way, and uses the space of the living room as

their dancing area, letting his playlist run in the background as he shows Gin the moves, then corrects her stance and footing when she mirrors him. Ryuu watches at first from the couch, chin pillowed on his drawn-up knees, but after another hour and Gin's insistent pushing, even he gets up and clumsily attempts a pose. His movements are inexperienced, but Chuuya can see a dancer's grace within him even beyond that.

If he started now… he could go places.

(Places that Chuuya was once aspiring to reach.)

Chuuya makes a mental note to talk to Hayashi about it, positive that she will be supportive no matter whether her son wants to play the violin or dance ballet. After three hours of relentless but fun dancing, Chuuya regrets that choice when that familiar grating pain surges through his ankle, the flares reaching even farther than usual. He can't help but feel robbed, even if he should have accepted it already.

Everything he likes doing isn't good for him. Sometimes he thinks, he might as well dig himself a hole and spent the rest of his life there. It won't make that much of a difference.

When he gets the "be ready in 10" text from Sigma, Chuuya checks himself out in the mirror one last time. His hair is curlier than usual. His eyeliner sharp as fuck. Leather pants and a slightly oversized leather jacket are covering his body. The only colorful thing is the ruby-red lace top that's fitted to look like a corset.

After reapplying lip balm and smacking his lips together as one final boost of confidence, Chuuya heads downstairs. Hayashi, who's fussing with the candles in the foyer, flashes him a beaming smile when he approaches. "Every time I see you," she says, snuffing out a match. "I remember how boring I used to dress when I was younger. You young kids look great."

"Thanks, Hayashi-san." Chuuya scratches the back of his neck. Choosing to wear what he wants to wear, always, in one way or another, comes with some kind of risk, but most of the time, it's totally worth it.

"So you're going to the birthday?"

Kneeling on the floor as he ties up his docs, Chuuya bites his lip. So maybe he should have read the group chat. "Um, yeah."

“Have fun then. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

Chuuya has seen Hayashi more than a little tipsy a fair share of times now, especially in these few god-awful weeks she spent fighting with her husband, so he figures getting trashed is okay. Outside, a car honks. Chuuya jumps up and flashes her a brief grin. "Yup! See you tomorrow!”

The car waiting for him is a dirty-brown Volkswagen polo. Chuuya opens the door to slip inside, ear-shatteringly loud from the stereo greeting him, and before he can even utter a syllable, Nikolai steps on the gas. (Someday, Chuuya thinks as the rapid increase of speed pushes him into his backseat, this fucking guy will drive himself into a ditch. And then he’ll probably post about it on Instagram.)

“Okay, okay,” he shouts over the music. It’s some Russian song with a heavy beat, the only word he really understands is *medusa*. “Do you even know where you’re driving?!”

“That’s all right!” Nikolai shouts back. “I know the city in and out! You just have to tell me where to go.”

Well, Chuuya doesn’t know the city in and out. He scrambles for his fucking phone —

In the passenger seat, Fyodor finally turns down the music to a human level. “You look dolled up, Nakahara.”

“I look like I always do,” he mutters as he searches for the address.

“You look good,” Sigma says.

“Thanks. Okay, it’s…” He tilts his head as he reads the map. “... there somewhere.”

With the help of Sigma, Chuuya navigates Nikolai through the city to their destination, almost causing five accidents in the process. Both Nikolai and Fyodor haven’t met any of the others, especially Dazai — though both of them only know vague details about him, like, for example, that he’s a ginormous asshole — so they ask a few questions. Nikolai wants to know whether someone will be angry if he throws up in the broom closet. Fyodor asks whether Chuuya’s looking forward to seeing Dazai. Sigma questions whether there will be enough booze.

Getting out of the car feels a little like walking to his death sentence. And maybe Chuuya’s unnecessarily dramatic, but he has a feeling that

mixing these two drastically different groups of people will not end well. Nevertheless, he's here now. Too fucking late to go back.

"Eh, Chuuya," Nikolai says as they approach the yacht on the end of the dock, not a gigantic thing but enough to make Chuuya once again wonder how he ended up here, "will your friends hate you if they catch me stealing their booze?"

Chuuya frowns.

"Just drink the fucking alcohol there like a normal person would."

"The first rule of going to a rich man's party is to always, always," Nikolai holds up his finger like he's holding an important speech and not spewing the first bullshit thought that came to his mind, "steal their alcohol."

"Do whatever you want as long as you don't get caught."

"I'll show them my magic tricks if they do."

Yeah, like that will make anything better. Chuuya's thankful when he spots Ranpo with a cocktail in his hand on the deck, frowning at his phone.

"Hey," Chuuya greets, making him lookup. "So whose birthday it is?" When Ranpo's mouth splits into a filthy smile, Chuuya lets out a groan. "Please, don't tell me it's yours."

That would be awkward and borderline rude.

"It's Dazai's."

Chuuya's throat goes dry.

What?

"You're kidding," he says — he pleads.

"Oh my," Fyodor says behind him. "What an unpleasant turn of the events." Then he nods to the other two, and they disappear inside. Chuuya's too busy processing to even care.

"You did not even bother to read the chat?" Ranpo asks with a curious tilt of his head.

Eyes squeezing shut, Chuuya shakes his head. "I was busy. I only

skimmed it after telling Yosano-san I'd come." Then he lets out an irritated breath. "Why would she tell me that Dazai might not even come?! If this is some kind of plan —"

"Because, most likely, he will not."

"Hah?"

"Out of seven birthdays, Dazai only celebrated one. And only because we locked him in a room overnight." Ranpo shrugs like inviting Chuuya to his birthday isn't utterly insane. "Every other time, Dazai disappeared and was not found until his birthday was over."

"That's so fucking stupid," Chuuya mutters.

"Perhaps it is."

"Can I have a sip of your drink?" Ranpo wordlessly hands it over. Chuuya wordlessly downs it one go. It's fruity and sweet, so it's not hard to gobble down, but he still feels slightly better afterwards. "Fine," he sighs. "Just know that I hate all of you."

"You missed us," Ranpo croons when they start walking inside.

"I despise you. All of you."

It's not as big of an affair as Chuuya thought it would be, an intimate number of people present, making him feel even worse. Not only because he's here, but because he brought his friends, and last time Dazai talked to Sigma, who's by far the least insane of the three, it didn't go well. Speaking of…

Chuuya glances around, searching for the nearest disaster. Ranpo tips his shoulder and nods towards the bar. Nikolai is animatedly talking to the bartender behind the counter. Sigma probably keeps him in check while Fyodor sits back and observes.

"Who's the quiet one?" Ranpo asks. "With the hat?"

"Fyodor." Chuuya arches his brow as he looks at him. *Why?*

"Hm."

"Hah? What's hm supposed to mean?"

"It means what it sounds like. Hm."

To be quite honest, Chuuya doesn't have the nerves to figure out what that means right now.

Ranpo sometimes reminds him of Dazai — a Dazai who's less manipulative and hateful but just as brilliant. And right now, Chuuya doesn't want to think of Dazai. He just wants to get trashed and forget.

On the way to the bar, Higuchi and Tanizaki greet him. They're just as welcoming as ever, Tanizaki already flushed and hiccuping as he hangs on to her side. When Higuchi says that it hasn't been the same without Chuuya the last few times, a strange feeling settles around his heart, though. No matter how many shots he downs afterwards, he can't shake it.

Because it hasn't been the same. Not for them. Not for him.

It feels like epic, cosmic injustice that Chuuya has felt the happiest, the most alive, and the closest to dancing whenever he was with Dazai.

Sigma, Nikolai, and Fyodor, to their credit, have neither stolen anything nor puked anywhere so far. They talk to Ranpo, Yosano, and Oda. Chuuya's there, busy having a heart to heart with the cocktail in his hands, but he's present and ready to break up a fight in case anything happens. Nothing happens. Nikolai convinces Sigma to dance at some point. Tanizaki almost falls overboard. Kunikida makes sure everyone drinks enough water, then ends up half-naked because of a drinking game.

And then Dazai arrives.

Chapter 24: A Long Story

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chuuya nearly misses it. It's late into the night, his friends are off doing god knows what, and Chuuya's been debating whether to pass out or get himself another drink. The pull inside his chest is almost magnetic, though, an invisible string giving his heart a gentle tug to turn around.

Yosano's fingers are wrapped around Dazai's bandaged wrist. For the birthday kid, he doesn't look nearly as happy as her, even with that paper crown someone put on his head. Chuuya pointedly turns back to his drink and plays with the tropical palm straw in his glass just so he has something to do with his fingers.

A moment later, an invading presence settles next to him on the bar, familiar and close, so close all Chuuya has to do to remember what it felt like to be touched by that same body, the same person, is press his eyes shut. "One vodka soda, please," Dazai tells the bartender. His body turns to Chuuya, and —

Dazai stiffens.

Chuuya meets his stare with an unabashed glower as he takes a generous sip of his drink. "What?" he snaps. "I only came here for the free booze. No one fucking bothered to tell me it was your birthday."

"I suppose that's why reading skills matter," Dazai says delicately. Whether that surprise just now was genuine, it vanishes as abruptly as it came, there and gone in a flash. "And you stayed."

"'Cause I figured I could return the favor and ruin your birthday."

"You think a lot of yourself to think you have the power to ruin it."

"Right." Chuuya's smile tastes like bitter blood on his tongue. "Nothing gets pasts these walls. It's all just a game to you."

Dazai's silent gaze is answer enough.

"Well, then, you won't mind if I entertain myself here, right?" Chuuya takes a look around. His options here are, indeed, limited, but he can

work with that. He bites his lip, absently playing with the metal of the piercing. “I’m feeling up for some fun tonight.”

Dazai arches his brow. “So your puppy doesn’t satisfy you?”

“We’re just friends.”

“Isn’t that what you always say?”

“*Fuck you*.”

“I think you’re confusing me with you.”

Before Chuuya has a chance to hiss out another reply, a pair of hands land on his shoulders. Apparently, Yosano and Ranpo have decided to take over the job of separating the two of them, Yosano leveling a look at Dazai, while Chuuya’s met with Ranpo’s feline smirk.

“I’m —”

“Less talking, Chuuya-kun,” Ranpo says and shoves a drink into his face. Chuuya grudgingly accepts it, catching Yosano do the same with Dazai in the corner of his vision. “Eyes on me.”

“We’re not kids,” he snaps.

“You certainly bark at each other like ones.”

“That’s his fault.” Chuuya winces when he hears how it sounds — like a seven-year-old on a playground fight — and drowns his misery with the next sip. “Where are Sigma and the other two?” he asks, both because Ranpo is all-knowing, and because the last time Chuuya saw them, it was with him.

“Outside. Deck.”

Chuuya dares another look in Dazai’s direction — who is deliberately looking through him like Chuuya isn’t even in the room. Like there isn’t a twelve thousand-kilometer-deep ocean of bullshit between them. Like they really are mere strangers.

“I’m going to join them,” Chuuya mutters, already fumbling in his pocket for the pack of cigarettes. He’s clearly unwanted here.

Ranpo doesn’t even miss a beat as he follows him. “And I’m going to join you.”

“You don’t have, you know. As much as I would like to shit in Dazai’s face, I’m not trying to keep you from him.”

“Don’t you worry about that,” Ranpo drawls. “I did want to talk to you about something, though.”

Arriving on the deck, Chuuya finally lights his cigarette, inhaling the smoke with a deep sigh. “About?”

“Tsushima Gen’emon.”

That is an oddly specific topic to talk about at a party. But when Chuuya looks at him, something serious passes over Ranpo’s features, murky clouds amidst a plethora of racing green emeralds. On such a pretty face, it’s not a pretty sight. “Shouldn’t you be talking to Dazai, considering it’s his father?”

“Call it a gut instinct, Chuuya-kun, but I doubt Dazai would appreciate anyone asking.”

No. He wouldn’t.

“What do you want to know?”

“It’s less about knowing and more about what you can do for me, which is keeping an eye on him for the next few weeks. I’m trying to see whether some information I have checks out.”

A rough breath of laughter bursts out of Chuuya. “You want me to stalk my host father?”

“Stalk is such a heavy word. I prefer observing.”

“Do I want to know what’s it about?”

“You can,” Ranpo says, “if you want to.”

For a moment, Chuuya is tempted, but… “Another day. When I’m sober and won’t forget half of the stuff you tell me. Fine. Whatever. I'll..." He shrugs. "... observe him even if he rarely's home."

Ranpo stretches out his arms and looks up into the night sky. "That's precisely why you're needed."

Bold of him to assume that Chuuya has any fucking clue what that even means, but. Ranpo raises his glass in cheers, clinks it with Chuuya's, and disappears down the stairs. Chuuya frowns to himself as

he weaves through the deck and spots the three of his friends leaning against the railing and looking out. Well, two of them anyway. Nikolai is trying to reenact the titanic scene. Fyodor laughs like he's going to let him drown any minute. Sigma snaps a picture of the two of them.

When Fyodor spots him, his laughter fades into a smirk. "Did you and your precious Dazai make up yet?"

"No," Chuuya mutters. "That's not happening."

"The best way to get revenge is to make them jealous," Nikolai exclaims. "Just grab one of us, and let's fucking go." Then he blinks. "Wait. Don't grab Dos-kun."

Chuuya rolls his eyes, but his gaze drifts to Sigma, and something tangible passes between them. Would using his friend in a feeble attempt to piss off Dazai be shitty? Yeah, childish even. Is Chuuya drunk enough to consider the idea anyway? Yup. He did, after all, say that he was feeling up for fun tonight, and what is a little bit of drama, if not pure, shameless fun?

Biting his lip, Chuuya offers Sigma a grin. "Want to dance?"

Somehow, he has a feeling they both know it's not about dancing, not in the slightest. If Sigma is in any way startled by the idea, it doesn't show on his face. He just grabs Chuuya's hand and tugs him along, away from Nikolai and Fyodor, and down below where all of Dazai's friends and Dazai himself are gathered in something like a makeshift dance floor.

"What you're doing is idiotic."

Dazai doesn't waste time wondering whether Yosano gave up his little secret, not when the person telling him this is Ranpo. Dazai's half-bitter smile stretches over the rim of his glass, just as sharp as the alcoholic beverage running down his throat.

"Dazai."

"What?" he snaps, exhaustion leaking from his pathetic tone more than anything. "Last I remember, I did not ask for your input."

"You know, there are other ways," Ranpo says. The softness in it makes Dazai feel even worse. "Of all the times to play stupid, why do it now?"

Dazai does neither care to answer that nor does he even know how to. Caring so much about someone to the point of pushing them away to protect them might sound stupid, but to Dazai, it makes crystalline-clear sense. It's not a pretty solution, by far not perfect considering how much time he spent convincing Chuuya do to the opposite, but it is a solution. It does make sense. It's not stupid.

"I know what I'm doing," Dazai says before turning around to leave. He does not yet know whether he simply needs to catch a breath of fresh air or whether he needs to give up on this party altogether, but he knows that coming was a bad idea. He stops short when he spots the unmistakable flash of red hair in the small dancing circle that has formed. Red melting into white as Dazai watches Chuuya lean forward and press his whole body into a kiss, arms looped over Sigma's neck, chests pressing together.

The image robs him of any thought.

Watching it feels wrong, so rottenly, decisively wrong when the reality is that it should be Dazai, not Sigma, not some stranger, and not anyone else is merely one truth away. Yet he can't turn away either because he knows that his own brain will do far worse things with him than Chuuya ever could.

Dazai said that it had been a game that day. Well, Chuuya's making his move.

Everyone else is too drunk, too caught up in their own little world to hear Dazai's breaking his own heart as he does nothing but watch. Yosano's dancing with Kouyou, whispering words into each other's ears now and then. Kunikida is passed out on the couch. Higuchi is laughing loudly as she spins Tanizaki around. Odasaku sidles up to Ranpo, bumping shoulders with him.

The world keeps spinning, not waiting for Dazai to catch up.

He just stares, feeling the pressure inside his ribs build and build and build until each breath feels like his entire chest is about to snap, break open and leave him bleeding out on his own birthday party.

A tiny eternity might as well have passed until Dazai manages to move his legs, push away, out of this suffocating room, and up the stairs. The deck is much quieter, music muffled, and the night air gentle as a warm wind ruffles Dazai's hair. Scrubbing a hand across his face, Dazai walks around the yacht, getting only a few feet before he halts to a grind.

He didn't think he would see that face again, but right there, leaning against the railing, is the same man who, not too long ago, put drugs into his drink.

Dostoevsky.

His patience for this entire day? It shatters like glass.

Dazai's fist connects with Dostoevsky's face with a satisfying crunch before Dazai takes it one step further and grabs him by the collar, shoving him against the railing. (Pain flames immediately through his fist, too, but Dazai has become rather good at shoving something so wretched aside.) For someone who has blood gushing out of his nose and who is this close to taking a night swim in Yokohama's bay, Dostoevsky looks rather amused when he lifts his head to smirk at Dazai.

The sight makes his guts twist. This isn't good.

"What are you doing here?"

"That's one way to say hello."

"Dos-kun, I don't like this man," the guy who stands next to Dostoevsky says. A glance at him reveals that he looks like a colorful clown all in all, but Dazai's not blind to all the muscles packed underneath the ridiculous clothes. Not that it makes Dazai retreat. "Can I remove him?"

"I'd be very careful with your choice of words if you care about your fucking Dos-kun." Dazai levels a look at Dostoevsky. How is it that every time this guy is involved, Dazai never sees it coming? "Speak."

Dostoevsky holds up his slimy hands. "And here I thought we had fun last time. Though… you did leave rather abruptly."

Because he fucking roofied him.

"If I find out that you have so much as touched anyone's drink here," Dazai says, "I will kill you."

Quietly enough to remain a free man, but thoroughly enough to make it last a few days.

"Oh, relax. I don't mix business with pleasure." Dostoevsky does his best to shrug in that compromising position. "If it makes you sleep any

better: running into your… boy toy," he rolls the words sinfully as if knowing exactly how much weight that relationship holds in his life, "was a coincidence. A very interesting one."

Boy toy.

Dazai isn't fond of the word, but he knows who Dostoevsky is referring to. He realizes why he's here. Chuuya's other friends beside Sigma. Dazai never met them, only heard of them and —

And within the span of his next breath, Dazai realizes that his own future lies in the hands of someone else now.

Again.

If Dostoevsky knows and has worked with Nobuko and Shibusawa, he could have told them. Shibusawa has nothing to gain from it. He can't ruin his father's career by outing him, but Nobuko —

Nobuko would probably eat it up.

Dazai's skin feels strung out from the inside. Raw and exposed. He didn't think far enough ahead.

Again.

For all he knows, Nobuko might be already speaking to his father at this very moment, delivering every word that Dazai was trying to hide in full glory. Then again, she would have made her move weeks ago if that's how long Dostoevsky has known. She's probably just waiting. Waiting to blindside Dazai.

"I'm going to leave now," Dostoevsky says, wearing a slimy grin.

"You're going to stay," Dazai decides right then and there. They might have minds that think alike, but Dazai's arms aren't quite as scrawny as his. "And we're going to have a long, nice chat."

"I already had a long, nice chat with your friend."

"Chuuya?"

"I believe his name was Ranpo. Chuuya wouldn't see through all the lies spun around him even if someone dangled it in front of him."

For that alone, Dazai's fist tightens in his collar. He's not going to hiss and snarl like a caveman to defend Chuuya's honor; he can do that

well enough on his own, but the insult is supposed to provoke and to bait Dazai, and it works.

“You shouldn’t have come here,” Dazai says and, at last, tugs the man forward with a sudden jerk, making him stumble to catch his footing.

“It was too entertaining of an offer to resist,” Dostoevsky says once he’s standing upright. “Dazai Osamu. You certainly make a far more interesting case than Shibuwasa made you out to be.”

Back then, after getting back from the failed business trip, Dazai tried to get to the bottom of the mystery that was Shibusawa. If not for his father’s company, then to prove that Dazai was, in fact, not to blame for the botched deal. As soon as he got wind of it, his father told him to stop, and well. Dazai did not care enough about the company to defy him.

Now, he’s starting to think he should have. Dazai gestures at the blonde guy that’s still standing there and, judging by the deep scowl etched onto his face, not very happy about it. Dostoevsky sighs. “Please go away, Kolya.”

It’s an odd way to address a friend, but it works. The guy all but pouts even as he turns around and walks away, arms crossed.

There’s one thing that’s abundantly clear from Dostoevsky, and it’s that whatever game he’s involved in, he does not have a personal stake in it. Not really.

So Dazai buries his dignity and asks, “What’s your price?”

Chuuya hoped that doing this would make him feel better, that it would at least satisfy the spiteful part of him, but instead, as he tugs his pants back up his thighs, he feels… strangely empty. Hollowed out.

“I’m sorry,” he finds himself saying.

On the bed of the tiny room, Sigma turns, eyes going wide. “Why? Was it — did you not like it?”

“No,” Chuuya hurries to say, cringing at his own choice of words, “no, no. I just — we’re friends, and I shouldn’t have —”

Sigma’s face relaxes, and as he stands up, he waves him away. “I know

that it didn't mean anything if that's what you're worried about."

It really didn't.

It wasn't bad at all either. Chuuya had fun. That thrill of doing this here with Dazai only one door away was only propelling enough until he quite literally came down from it and realized that he used someone else, used Sigma, for his own benefit. Just like Dazai used him.

"Chuuya," Sigma says and touches his arm, no more and no less than that, "it's fine. Really."

So that's what Chuuya tells himself as he adjusts his clothes and opens the door, hoping his walk of shame will get overshadowed by the party that's still raging on.

He knows that something's wrong the moment he sees that most of the people that have been dancing here like there's no tomorrow just half an hour ago are now all gathered in a circle around the bar, and —

When Higuchi spots them, she — she quickly turns away, not in embarrassment but like something is really, really wrong. Chuuya clutches Sigma's wrist as he forces himself to walk forward. He'd laugh at how quickly most of his — Dazai's friends disperse if he didn't see Yosano bandaging Dazai's hand behind the counter.

"What happened?" Chuuya asks.

Ranpo slurps loudly on an iced coffee, and that's weird too because there's a lot of coffee here for a bunch of people that were all but inhaling booze literally moments ago. When Dazai looks up, he doesn't even bother to acknowledge him, his dark gaze flashing to Sigma instead. "You should leave."

"Dazai," Chuuya snaps. "He didn't do —"

"No, but his friend did."

"What?"

"Dostoevsky," Dazai says and cocks an eyebrow. "Did you know you were hanging around a guy that roofies drinks or did that fun fact escape you?"

Sigma looks just as confused as Chuuya feels. "What are you talking

about?"

Dazai wordlessly shakes his head, and somehow his silence feels even worse.

"I'll call you a cab," Yosano offers after dusting her hands off her mini-dress. "It's late."

"I can call one myself," Sigma says, "thanks."

Chuuya glances from him back to Dazai. "You can't just kick him out without even telling us what the hell happened. What do you mean Fyodor roofied someone? When —"

"We can," Dazai cuts in, "and we did."

"It's a long story, Chuuya-kun," Yosano adds.

"This is bullshit," he decides. "If Sigma leaves, then so do I."

And that somehow makes the situation ten times worse than what it feels like. Dazai stands up. "You're not going with him."

"I think I can make that decision by myself."

"Hey," Sigma squeezes his arm. "It's fine. I don't know what happened, but it's probably best that I leave."

That's so fucking stupid. Dazai's being an asshole as always, and Chuuya refuses to let him trample all over him again for the tenth time. "I'm not just going to let you leave alone."

"Chuuya," and this time, it's Kouyou's voice, someone that shouldn't be on Dazai's side if it wasn't necessary. "We'll call Sigma a cab, but you should stay here. Please."

Chuuya doesn't like this, He feels like a shitbag of a friend for letting this happen, but it's starting to sound more and more serious, so after another staredown with Dazai, he lets out a sharp, curt breath. "Fine, but I'll wait with him outside."

It seems to be good enough for his friends. They let him escort Sigma up the stairs and off the yacht. However, Chuuya can't help but notice Dazai and Ranpo staying on the deck where they can watch the two of them on the edge of the road, waiting for the cab.

A loaded silence hangs between them. The events of the night seem to

catch up to Chuuya in that time: Dazai's birthday, the conversation with Ranpo, the countless amount of sugary drinks and no fucking water, the sex, and now this.

Fyodor...

He doesn't know the details, but the thought alone makes him sick.

"I really don't know anything about that," Sigma finally murmurs, hands clenched by his sides. "I know Fedya isn't the most moral person in the world. No one of us is. But drugging someone. I would never..."

Chuuya returns the gesture from earlier and squeezes his hand. "Hey, I was hanging out with him too for the last months, and I didn't know."

"Yeah, but I've been friends with him for years now."

"Sometimes," Chuuya says and shrugs weakly, "the people we think we know best can turn out to be strangers." He throws a look around his shoulder. As if connected by an invisible string, he finds Dazai's gaze on him, on their linked hands, even in the darkness. *A stranger.*

Sigma's cab rolls into the street, headlights illuminating the shaken expression on his face. Chuuya steps forward and gives him a hug. "I'll keep you updated, okay?" Because Sigma deserves to know more than the scraps he's been given by Dazai.

Turning back to the yacht, back to Dazai, Chuuya doesn't know what to expect, but his steps as he approaches him are long and quick, a caged earthquake propelling him forward.

"What the hell," Chuuya exclaims once he's close enough, "is wrong with you?"

Ranpo wordlessly excuses himself.

"No," Dazai's quick to reply, "what the hell is wrong with you? Do you even know what kind of people you're spending your time with?"

"You tell me since you're apparently an expert!"

"Dostoevsky isn't your friend, Chuuya! Has never been! He's been feeding information to one of my father's business rivals all this time!"

Chuuya throws up his hands, feeling like this is a goddamn joke. "And how was I supposed to fucking know that?! How was Sigma supposed

to know?!”

“Perhaps if you’ve been here instead of with him,” Dazai says, quiet and slow this time, “both of you would have known what happened.”

And there it is.

Chuuya laughs in disbelief. “Yeah, Dazai. Go ahead and tell me what a whore I am for sleeping with someone. Because you have so much right to do that, huh?”

Dazai’s jaw clenches. “I didn’t —”

“You fucking implied it!”

“I was worried!”

“Why?! I was just fucking entertainment for you!”

For a foolish moment, it looks like Dazai’s going to say something worth listening to, his pupils going impossibly dark. But the flicker of emotions passes, and he visibly silences himself in front of Chuuya. “Because Dostoevsky is dangerous.”

With his next exhale, Chuuya feels all of his remaining energy seep out, leaving only exhaustion and hazy confusion in its wake. He grips the railing. “He roofied someone?” The words feel thick in his mouth, muddy and so, so wrong.

“Yeah.”

“Fuck.”

“He claims it was a one-time thing, but,” Dazai shrugs, “it’s not just something you know how to do.”

“Did — did something happen with that person?”

A part of him is scared to hear the answer. Another part needs to know regardless.

“No. The person noticed in time. He — “ Dazai stumbles over his word and deliberately looks down at the calm, dark sea. “The person got away.”

The way Dazai’s speaking about it, the amount of information he knows, and the fact that he must have recognized him somehow —

“Dazai?”

“Yes?”

“Was it you?”

A silent beat passes between them. Chuuya wouldn’t blame him if he didn’t get any reply back at all. “Yeah.”

“Fuck,” Chuuya mutters again and presses his face against the heels of his hands. “I’m sorry.”

“Like I said, nothing happened. Yosano’s checked everyone here to make sure everyone’s fine. You should let her take a look at you, too. Just in case.”

He nods and then glances at Dazai. “So he’s been working with…” He frowns. “... your father’s rival?”

“It’s a long story,” Dazai murmurs.

“I’ve got time.”

Chuuya almost expects Dazai to say no, to say that it’s none of his business, but instead, he turns around to lean against the railing, offering Chuuya a cigarette that he accepts wordlessly. Then he starts talking.

The story goes like this: Dazai goes on a business trip for a deal that has been all but sealed. Everything's fine until the last night when the sales representative, Shibusawa, suddenly shows up with the same girl Dazai's father had tried to couple him with. Her, and Fyodor, who then tries to roofie Dazai in an attempt to create a public scandal to have a legal reason to jump out of the business deal.

(Chuuya remembers the phone call they had that night. All this time, he thought Dazai had been on the way back to his hotel suite. He thought it was cute for him to call and talk to Chuuya. *Cute*. Never that Dazai was on the verge of a fucking panic attack.)

Then, somehow, Chuuya ends up meeting Fyodor on the flight. Fyodor connects the dots between Chuuya and Dazai and feeds that information to all the wrong people.

And why does he do that in the first place? Well, from what little Fyodor had told Dazai before he was kicked off the yacht, it's because

he owes Shibusawa a favor, which apparently, came in the form of sabotaging Dazai and the company he represented on that night. And Shibusawa...

Dazai doesn't seem to know either.

Chuuya frowns.

It's a twisted web of names and relationships. It's fucking confusing, especially when he's still half-drunk, blood rushing through his head like he's on a carousel.

"So they wanted to get your father... through you," Chuuya finally concludes. Next to him, Dazai nods. "But Ranpo... wants to get your father as well."

Dazai's head tilts. "I never even mentioned Ranpo."

Right.

"You didn't, but earlier Ranpo told me to keep an eye on your father," he explains with air quotes, "you know since we live in the same house when he's not in the office..." Chuuya trails off when every facial expression on Dazai's face stills, the sea before the fucking storm crashes in. Chuuya distantly realizes that perhaps Dazai was never meant to know about that. Weird, because it's his own father, but...

"I am drunk," he says as a reminder.

That eerie silence evaporates into a momentary twitch of Dazai's lips before he looks away. "Yeah, I can see that." Chuuya swallows as he grips the railing. "That's something I will have to ask Ranpo myself."

"I mean, I can imagine why."

Those eyes drag back to him, lashes fluttering. "What do you mean?"

"You're building your own bar with your father's help, but..." Chuuya considers what he wants to say, pausing. "... it comes with a price, doesn't it? You can't be who you really want to be." His following words taste bitter. "We... you and I were a silly joke to you, but you were miserable working for your father. That wasn't a lie, or a game, or another party trick of yours." That was real. "Maybe Ranpo just wants to help you."

Dazai's hand clenches around the railing. "Ranpo should let me deal

with it myself."

"Or you could allow the people who care about you to help you for once," Chuuya shoves his hands into the pockets of his jacket, turning around to leave but not before giving Dazai one last look, "maybe you wouldn't be getting off on using people for your own entertainment then."

Dazai, for once, doesn't have a reply to that.

Downstairs, Chuuya lets Yosano check him out, but it looks like he is only drunk. No drugs. Thank fucking god. He sees Ranpo go back up to talk to Dazai, and when they both come back, neither of them looks really happy. Chuuya doesn't bother to come in-between that mess. Instead, he flops down on the couch next to Higuchi and Tanizaki as they all wait for cabs and chauffeurs to pick them up.

It felt normal, so normal to talk to Dazai again. And if Chuuya had a tiny bit less self-respect, he would have listened for a dozen more hours, perhaps even fall into the same trap again.

Too bad that Dazai's shitty situation doesn't excuse his shitty personality.

Chapter End Notes

warnings: discussion of roofying & spiked drinks

Chapter 25: Free Falling

Chapter Notes

warnings: explicit sexual content towards the end

Dazai can't get out of bed.

Don't get him wrong, every morning is a fight when a blanket of relentless, overpowering exhaustion drags him down with each movement. Having lived with both insomnia and a variety of mental disorders his whole life, he got pretty used to it at some point, though.

But then there are moments like these when not even an incoming tsunami would get him to move. Dazai would let himself drown all too happily. So he doesn't even try to. For one day, he ignores the calls. He ignores the buzzing of his phone like the buzzing of a mayfly in his room. He becomes one with his bed. He becomes one with the spiderweb in his head, letting himself fall for a few minutes, hours, days.

Eventually, he hears the click of his lock opening as someone enters, and a few moments later, the familiar telltale sound of Akiko's stilettos rapping against the marble floor. The only thing Dazai does to hide his pathetic state of being is drawing the covers higher over his body so that he's barely visible when his best friend finally enters his room.

"I knew you were ignoring my calls."

Dazai hums. "I was sleeping."

She's gracious enough not to point out the time, instead sitting down at the edge of the bed. "Do you need anything? Food? Water? Your meds?"

"I need you to give up on me and let me die in peace," he murmurs.

“Uh, no. Next request.”

"... water." His throat has been uncomfortably itchy for a few good hours now, but Dazai forgot to bring a glass of water last night, and even though he hates the taste of dryness in his mouth, it was not bad enough to stand up and make the trip to the bathroom, let alone the kitchen. "And gum if you have some."

"I'm not an animal. Of course, I have some."

He feels her getting off the bed, then return again within a minute, leaving a bottle of water on his nightstand along with a pack of gums before slipping under his covers and lying down next to him. A memory from school flashes in front of his eyes, vaguely similar to the position they're now in. Yosano having a crisis after her first drunk kiss with Kouyou, and Dazai listing off arguments whether he was, in fact, bisexual or whether the guy that he had successfully seduced on a family vacation was the result of boredom and a silent, meaningless rebellion against his father.

The memory fades away, leaving the colorless, blank page of his presence behind.

"He hates me," Dazai says.

The one person that he loved.

(And he never loved anybody.)

(Not like that.)

And Dazai ruined it.

And it might as well have been all for nothing. Because Nobuko knows and could use it against him at any given moment. Because Ranpo, his own friend, is insistent on ruining his father even though that would only complicate things. Because Chuuya looks at him, and all he sees is a lie.

"You hurt him a lot," Akiko murmurs. Not an accusation, but a statement.

The truth.

Dazai could hear Chuuya's heart break right there, a few rooms away in the kitchen. He could hear it shattering, and still, he uttered word after word.

Dazai closes his eyes and presses his face deeper into the pillow. He doesn't complain when she wraps her arms around him, holding him close.

His future will be empty; he's sure of it. For the longest time, Dazai was even looking forward to that. Doing whatever he wants. Abiding

by no one's rules but his own. Being so goddamn free, not even chains could hold him back from floating away like a leaf in the wind.

For the longest time, that was the dream.

Now that he had a taste of what it would have felt like to be free with someone else, that dream tastes like ash in his mouth. But at least, he will have this. Akiko. Ready to haul him back to the ground whenever he gets too close to the cliff's edge. At least, he will not be entirely alone.

After everything that happened last week, Chuuya thought that was it, that he had officially reached rock bottom, and that it couldn't get any worse.

That is until his body decides to teach him a lesson in neglect.

Because right now, he's sitting in an examination room in the hospital and listening to a doctor who basically tells him that he's been a fucking idiot this entire time. He was feeling fine this morning, sore and tired but *fine*, and then —

Then he wasn't feeling much of anything but pain. Cutting, excruciating flares of pain that rolled over his entire leg so that when Hayashi saw him crumpling to the floor in the kitchen, she promptly decided to take him to the hospital.

"And how long have —" The door opens, and Chuuya almost chokes on his spit when Dazai slips into the room. Out of all the people in this world who could have seen him broken and pale and struggling on a hospital bed, it has to be him?

His hair looks weird, disheveled, and sweaty, and when he looks at Chuuya, there's genuine relief in his eyes before he wordlessly leans against the wall. Judging by the lack of surprise on Hayashi's face, she must have texted him, but — but it doesn't make sense. *Why?* Why bother to show up when Dazai made it clear nothing between them was ever real? That night on his birthday — it didn't change anything. It didn't erase everything that's been broken between the two of them. All Dazai did was talk about Fyodor. That's it. Chuuya had compassion for that, but everything else?

"Uh," the doctor, an elderly man with a bald head, clears his throat and starts over, "how long have you been experiencing the flares in your ankle?"

Chuuya swallows. "A few months." Both Hayashi and Dazai's heads snap to him, but he ignores them, trying to come up with a number more precise. It started when he tried to dance again — and miserably failed. It began when Chuuya stopped taking care of his own body and ignored the damn pain. "Since February. I — I thought it was just the ankle impingement flaring up now and then."

"Well, the impingement usually worsens when you put too much pressure on your ankle instead of letting it rest. Are you a very active person?" He glances at both Hayashi and Dazai then. "Dancing? Running? Any sort of footwork? Does he do that a lot?"

Hayashi seems to struggle with an answer. She's been living with Chuuya for half a year, but they always see each other inside. She doesn't know what Chuuya does outside of home.

"He is," Dazai suddenly replies. "Very active. Never gives himself a fucking break."

"It was getting better after the accident," Chuuya explains. So what if he pushed himself a little? So what if he ignored the pain? It's the only way forward. At least, that's what he's been told once.

The doctor lets out a sigh and folds his hands over his notepad. "The syndrome got better because you were forced to quit dancing. If you hadn't, the impingement could develop into something far more serious. However, if you remained just as physically active afterwards, then you might as well have continued dancing."

Chuuya's breath stills.

He did continue dancing. Not a lot. But enough to make the pain get that much worse.

"So what now?" he asks, voice rough.

"Now we're going to run a few blood tests and do an X-ray of your ankle."

A tired sigh leaves his body, and he rubs a hand against his temple. This is going to be a long day.

It takes another hour before he's officially released, the doctor saying they will call once the results are in.

He gets quite a dose of pain medication, but walking still feels

uncomfortable, so they give him crutches. It makes Chuuya hate Dazai even more.

That he sees all this when he has no goddamn right to be here. That he worms his way inside even the most fucking painful parts of his life just to — Chuuya doesn't even know *what* it is that Dazai is trying to achieve here. He's goddamn clueless.

Because Hayashi's next to him on the way out, he can't say anything, simmering in bitter silence as he hobbles down the hospital hallway with the two of them making fucking small talk to avoid the elephant in the room.

Him.

Next to the car, Hayashi checks her phone, her face morphing into a mild grimace.

"The children," Dazai guesses correctly, and Chuuya's genuinely surprised he knows that much considering he never even talks to his siblings. "You know what. How about you take care of them, and I drive Chuuya home? He should get some rest."

Chuuya scowls in the dim light of the dusk but doesn't bother arguing because he knows the outcome before Hayashi can even utter the word.

"You're an angel, Osamu. I'll pick up groceries on the way. Will you be all right in the meantime, Chuuya-kun?"

"Don't worry," he says. "I'll just take a nap or something."

Hayashi glances between them, and Chuuya wonders whether the thick tension between them looks as obvious as it feels, but even that leaves him empty. He's just tired. So tired.

Chuuya only looks at Dazai when she slips inside the car. "Where did you park?"

"On the other side of the hospital," Dazai says with a grimace. Great. That will take ages.

Chuuya wordlessly nods and moves to start walking when Dazai taps his arm. "I can carry you."

Wow.

"No."

"Don't be stubborn. You're pale, tired, and in pain, and I don't want to be responsible if you pass out for the second time today."

"Then you shouldn't have come here!" Chuuya snaps. "Why did you?"

"That," Dazai says with a look, "I will answer if you let me carry you. Piggyback."

Chuuya grits his teeth, this close to using his crutch to shove it down Dazai's throat before another wave of white-hot pain rolls over him, making every single joint in his body ache, and he gives up on himself for today. "*Fine*."

Dazai looks way too fucking pleased as he takes over the crutches and then leans down so Chuuya can loop his arms around Dazai's neck before he helps him up with his hand on his thighs. It's a chaotic mission with the crutches between them, but somehow they make it work.

"Hang on tight," Dazai says as he rises back to his full height.

"Obviously," Chuuya mutters, ignoring the urge to just wholly lean into Dazai and melt because of how tired he is. This is only to get to the fucking car. Just another sacrifice. "I'm not planning to fall, you fucking idiot."

He feels Dazai's chest rumble with something like laughter and he ignores that, too.

"I came," Dazai says after a while, one hand touching Chuuya's healthy knee, "because I thought — I thought Dostoevsky did something. I don't know. Hayashi only said that you were in the hospital. Not why."

Chuuya huffs. "I haven't heard from Fyodor since that night, and if I did, I'd send him back to wherever the hell he came from."

He did talk to Sigma, but it looks like he was left in the dark, too. Despite the years of friendship stretching between them. It’s shitty.

"That's good," Dazai says, and the rest of Chuuya's ride to the car passes silently.

As far as he's concerned, this is the only thing worth saying. He doesn't want Dazai here. He doesn't want Dazai to be nice to him all of

a sudden. He doesn't want anything from him except for a ride home so Chuuya can slip into his bed and never have to see his face again. Dazai asks a few irrelevant questions, tries to talk to him like it's something they normally do, so Chuuya shuts his eyes and imagines he's in a car that's able to drive all by itself as he ignores him. No Dazai in sight.

As Hayashi mentioned, no one's home when they arrive. Chuuya refuses to let Dazai help him again and relies on his crutches instead. It's the only reason why he can't do anything to stop Dazai from following him back into his room.

As soon as the door falls shut, Chuuya's wrecked glare turns to Dazai. "You can go now."

It's not surprising that Dazai doesn't. It's just… cruel at this point.

"Go away."

Dazai shakes his head. "No."

"I don't want you here."

Chuuya doesn't even want to be here, broken and fragile like a doll that's falling apart at its seams. Everything is falling apart. *He* is falling apart, and he doesn't want Dazai to be here to witness it all over again, win another price for his collection of weird mind games.

"Chuuya, I'm not going to leave."

"You —!" Chuuya grabs the nearest thing on his bed, his pillow, and chucks it at Dazai, who lets it hit his chest with an unimpressed stare. Bastard. "You didn't fucking mind leaving me alone on my birthday." He throws another pillow. And another. "I'm not even sure you *can* mind, Dazai! Because you don't fucking care! You don't care about anything but yourself!" The half-empty water bottle on the floor next to him is next, and finally, Dazai, at least, ducks to avoid getting hit with that. "It's all just a fucking game to you!"

"I —"

"I don't fucking want you here!"

"It wasn't a game!" Dazai shouts, and Chuuya stops short with the hairbrush in his hand. Not because it shocks him.

(It does.)

But because it's so funny.

It's so goddamn hilarious that Chuuya could cry.

And he does. He laughs as stray tears flow down his cheeks, blurring his vision as his lungs fight to keep up with the confusing amount of signals his brain is currently sending them. "Get the fuck — out," he manages to wheeze out between fits of suffocating laughter.

"I lied," Dazai says anyway, not listening to him because he *never* fucking listens. "I lied because it was the only way to make you stay away from me. Because I knew you'd never forgive me for that."

"Stop it —" Chuuya shakes his head. He doesn't want to hear this shit. "Stop fucking lying —"

Instead, though, Dazai steps closer. Slowly. Carefully. As if he's approaching a wounded animal that might snap at any given minute.

"I realized too late how dangerous my father could be," Dazai continues. "I was always going to fly with you, but he made me an offer to work with him after rejecting the business proposal for the bar —"

No. No, no, no, no.

"*Shut up*."

"It was never a game to me. It was real. All of it."

"You said —"

"I lied!"

"And what if you're lying again!" it bursts out of Chuuya. "Why tell me now?! Why should I ever believe you again?!"

Dazai stops short in front of him, his usual attire of confidence and false pride spilling out of him like ink. This is the real Dazai. He looks real. He looks so real, but —

Chuuya has believed in that lie one too many times to be that naive *again*.

"My father will find out one way or another," Dazai finally murmurs,

"because it's out of my hands now."

And despite everything, Chuuya *still* hurts for him. Despite all the pain Dazai has caused him, Chuuya can still fucking feel his pain like it's his own because no matter how many layers of dirt are on top of it, that thin string that connects them is still there. Buried deep but never dead.

He saw Dazai's face when he told him about Fyodor and all the secrets he spilled. He saw Dazai bend for his father time and time again. He saw Dazai sitting on his bed, exhausted from working for that man. And Chuuya hates that this is happening to him, but *fuck*.

"So what," Chuuya croaks out, voice hollow, "now you deem me worthy of knowing all this? Or —" He looks down at himself. At his body. At his ankle that caused all this. He looks goddamn pathetic. "Do you feel sorry for me?" he asks. "Is that it? Is that why you told me that? To make me feel better about myself?"

"That's not it," Dazai says.

"I don't believe you."

"I don't have a reason to lie to you anymore. *That's* why. Because I took a risk and lost anyway."

Chuuya sniffs, wiping at his eyes. "You would have continued the charade if you hadn't been cornered?"

Dazai gazes at him. “Yes.”

"Do you realize how stupid you sound?"

"I would do it again. If it means keeping you safe, then I would do it a thousand times over."

"I can protect myself!" Chuuya snaps. "I'm not some fragile, little thing you have to keep safe!"

"You don't know what my father is capable of —"

"I do! I have lived with men like him when I was a child! I know exactly how they work, Dazai!"

Dazai's lips press together.

"You were scared," Chuuya says. "And you know what? I don't fucking

blame you for that. I was lucky enough to end up with my dads. You weren't. And that's terrifying. But —" He grits his teeth together at the sheer amount of webs and hoops Dazai jumped through to protect himself. The games. The manipulation. The lies. When it could have been so goddamn easy. "But you could have told me that," Chuuya whispers. "You could have told me, for fuck's sake, and I would have understood."

"No," Dazai says automatically, "I couldn't tell you because you would have understood. I wanted to —"

"Protect me, yes," Chuuya finishes for him. "Do you even hear yourself speak? You didn't protect me. You *ruined* me."

Dazai's lashes flutter. He looks so lost right now. So young. Like the child he once was, the one that fell prey to his father's verbal slaughter. Because even the greatest people in the world have that one person who can make them feel small, so small that they might crumble into dust. For Dazai, that is his father.

And for Chuuya, it's person standing right in front of him.

"I once asked you what would happen if you had to choose between your world and me, and you chose them." A tear slips away, falling to the floor. "You basically wrangled a confession out of me, and then you did the one thing that you knew would fucking kill me and —"

"I never slept with them," Dazai says. "I brought them home. I shared the bed with them, but I passed out not even three minutes later. I never cheated."

"You *lied!"*

"I'm sorry."

"That's not enough!"

"I love you." It's a plea, a desperate prayer whispered looking up at the sky, but —

"That's not enough," Chuuya whispers. As quiet as the words are, they slice through the air like through flesh.

He can see how much it wrecks Dazai, and maybe a tiny part of him takes satisfaction in that, for hurting him back, but mostly, Chuuya feels like someone carved a hole in his chest. Empty. He wants to take

the words back.

No, he wants to take back the last months, so that when that drunk girl tells Chuuya Dazai went home with someone else, he can ditch his flight, drive to his apartment, and knock on his door until he opens, and they can talk until they figure something out. *Together*. Because that's how it's supposed to be. Working together, not against each other.

Dazai lets himself sit down. He doesn't cry. He just — he looks exhausted, like someone drained all life out of him. Then he reaches for Chuuya's, more or less, healthy leg, finding his eyes. "What will it take?"

Chuuya’s lips part in confusion. "What?"

"What will it take for you to forgive me? To make it better?"

"Nothing."

"There has to be something."

"It doesn't work like that, Dazai," he snaps. "It's not a matter of scoring fucking points. I don't trust you anymore. I look at you and — and all I see is... " he trails off. He has said enough already.

"I will never lie to you again," Dazai says. "Ever."

Chuuya lets out a dry laugh. "It's too late for that now."

Dazai comes closer, all but kneeling in front of him. "What if I beg?"

Tangled between all the cobwebs of regret, doubt, and anger, Chuuya finds a bolt of heat flash in his guts.

So maybe the thought of Dazai on the ground for him, begging, is morbidly alluring. That doesn't mean anything. The fact that they are still at a crossroad with two oppositional directions remains the same.

"Do whatever you want," he murmurs. "It's not going to change anything."

He flinches a little when Dazai presses his eyes, wet, against his thigh, hiding his face, but he doesn't do anything to stop it either. For someone he wants to hate so deeply, Chuuya still cares about him so damn much.

When Dazai pulls away, his hand remains a solid, warm weight against his skin. "Are you in pain? Can I do something for you?"

That... comes and goes.

"Right now, everything just feels stiff. Tense." In desperate need of —

His breath stills around the same time as Dazai's.

"What are you thinking?" Chuuya demands. Because minutes ago, Dazai promised him no more lies. (Because part of Chuuya will always look for a reason to stay even if all rational thought tells him to leave.)

"I was going to say that sex can relieve pain," Dazai tells him, meeting his stare. "Given our circumstances, I didn't. And… for what it's worth, we would be looking for two different things if we did this."

"What would you be looking for then?"

"You."

Chuuya feels his heart roaring in his ears. "Would you do it anyway if I asked you to?"

"Yes."

Later Chuuya will tell himself he did it to even the scale between them, to hurt him back. Not because he missed it, missed *him*, and desperately needed something solid and comforting when everything around him was crumbling to pieces.

In the end, it doesn't matter.

Dazai ends up on top of him, bracing himself with his palms on each side of Chuuya as they stare at each other, caught in the perverse nostalgia of this position. When Dazai tries to lean down, Chuuya stops him with a hand on his chest.

"I still hate you," he whispers as if to remind himself. He can't kiss Dazai. He can't bear the thought of anything soft and vulnerable. Of love.

A flash of agony flickers in Dazai's eyes before he says, "You wish you would, but you don't.

You never have."

"I do," he says stubbornly even as he drags his eyes away from that face and starts working on unclasping Dazai's belt.

Chuuya doesn't bother with his button-up shirt, not when all he wants is the sex, no matter how much he used to like driving his hands across the plane of lean, hard muscles on Dazai's stomach, his chest, his arms. "I hate you for being a liar." Chuuya hates him for being *right*.

Dazai yanks down his coffee-stained sweatpants and briefs in one breath, tossing them to the side. Chuuya's heart hammers in his chest, so staggeringly full after being worn out to the point of feeling hollow. His cock twitches at the sudden exposure, twitches again when Dazai's hand wraps around him, stroking him from top to bottom before digging his thumb into his slit.

"You don't hate me," Dazai says again, hoarse and breathy, as he maps out Chuuya's body with his eyes.

Chuuya hates him for being so expressive when it's just the two of them, for loving that broken piece of a body so much that Chuuya can't even stomach it.

"You disgust me," he hisses with his hips bucking up into Dazai's fist over and over again, desperately seeking that bone-deep pleasure he could ever only get from Dazai, knowing how to push each and every single one of his buttons. "I can't even look at you."

And a moment later, the words come true. Dazai flips him over onto his stomach, his fingers digging into the flesh of his ass, kneading and pulling at the cheeks. It leaves Chuuya almost cornered between Dazai and the wall next to his bed, but he can't be bothered to be annoyed by it right now.

"Then don't. You just want me to fuck you anyway, right?"

"Yes," Chuuya breathes. *Fuck me. Fuck me until I forget how much I hate you and what you did to us.* It's been so goddamn long, Chuuya could cry from either relief or disappointment in himself. Dazai presses a finger against his rim, just massaging and teasing him, enough to make Chuuya buck his hips weakly because the friction he gets from rutting against his sheets is the only damn thing he's getting right now.

"That's all you ever wanted, Chuuya," Dazai continues. "Isn't it?"

"Fuck you, that was the deal at the start." Chuuya kicks out his healthy leg then, trying to nudge Dazai into the direction of his nightstand. "The lube is in the first drawer. Black bag."

Behind him, the warm palm on his ass leaves for a moment, bed dipping as Dazai must stretch. "Get the condoms, too."

"You have to tell me if you're in pain," Dazai suddenly says.

It's like his whole life revolves around this one fucking word at this point.

The frustration feels like white-hot steam in his eyes, and Chuuya buries his face in the sheets, hands clenching and unclenching periodically. "I'm not an idiot. I wouldn't let you fuck me when something fucking hurts."

"Chuuya does like to push his limits," Dazai points out.

"And I know —"*Ah.* At last, two slick fingers push into him, slow to let him adjust at the intrusion but definitely enough to make him enjoy the satisfying burn of the stretch, cock twitching under him. "— know my limits, asshole."

"Coming from the same person who just came back from the hospital where he was told he didn't take care of his body."

"Are you here to hold a goddamn lecture or fuck me?" Holding his breath, he slowly slides his knees under himself to lift his ass and arch his back. It doesn't hurt. Not really. "Because I can find someone else who'll do it if you don't — ah."

He hoped that would do the trick.

Dazai not only picks up the pace, establishing quick, deep thrusts with fingers, but he slides an arm under Chuuya's belly, supporting his weight. Technically, he's still on his knees, but with most of his weight gone, held up by Dazai, it feels — easier, lighter. And fucking good with the fingers inside him. "Just how many people did you fuck after me, huh?"

Chuuya shakes his head, refusing to dive into this topic, even as he feels that familiar warmth coiling in his guts, sending electric sparks of pleasure into every single nerve of his body. The arm under him squeezes him, and Chuuya feels himself lifted a few inches higher, a few inches closer to Dazai's heavy, solid presence behind him. The

fingers slow down, and he presses in another finger with a satisfying squelch before fucking them back into Chuuya.

"A how many times were you disappointed when it wasn't like it is with me, huh?"

"*Fuck... you*," Chuuya hisses through his teeth because it's true and because his fingers feel so, so dizzyingly good. "No right. You — you have *no right* —"

"No right to what?" Dazai asks behind him, so dangerously close Chuuya's back must be already pressed to his chest.

Despite himself, Chuuya's head tosses back. More. He needs more. "To be fucking — ah, territorial!" His hand shoots out to grab Dazai's face, his hair, anything he can get it on before tugging. "Just fuck me —"

His breath leaves him in a surprised gasp when Dazai drops him back on the bed, as quickly as he picked him up, his palm sliding around his waist to keep him there.

"Was it like this then?" Dazai asks, pulling his fingers out and leaving Chuuya devastatingly empty.

Chuuya can barely hear anything over the violent pounding of his heart, but the bed dips, and a moment later, he feels Dazai settle above him, thighs on each side of him. "Did you beg him to fuck you too, huh?"

"I'm not going to bed for anything you bastard —"

"So if just do this —" Dazai's cock drags over Chuuya's ass, sliding between his cheeks and grazing his rim, deliberately teasing him — "You won't beg me to fuck you?"

"I might fucking kill you," Chuuya hisses, "but I won't beg."

"Is that so?" Suddenly Dazai's close. *Too close* because Chuuya can feel his breath fanning over his cheek, warm and shivery, and all he would have to do to kiss him is turn his head but — no. "I recall you doing just that not too long ago."

Chuuya meets his gaze only to breathe out another, "fuck you."

Dazai's eyes flicker down to his lips, back up, and they soften. Out of all the things he's said in the last few minutes, this is what kills

Chuuya, makes him turn away and bury his face in the sheets so he can try to pretend this isn't Dazai who he's about to have sex with. Perhaps Dazai feels the same because, at last, his hands slide lower to his ass and —

Fuck.

His cock pushes inside, so slow but so good that Chuuya can't even suppress a muffled, broken moan. God, he's missed this. There's no denying it. Dazai might lie about a lot of things, but he was right about this. That he knows Chuuya's body in and out. Knows each and every spot on his skin that makes his eyes roll back. Knows the exact rhythm that lets him climb the peak as fast as possible. Dazai simply knows him. More than anyone else ever could.

The position doesn't give Chuuya much room to do anything but take it as Dazai snaps his hips into him over and over again until all of his coherent thoughts dissolve into an endless stream of *more, more, more*, and *faster*. Until Chuuya feels Dazai lean down and set his teeth into the skin of his shoulder. Until everything in Chuuya becomes both taut and hyper-aware of Dazai and —

His lungs burn as he comes, gasping quietly, while Dazai fucks him through it and beyond before his movements grow into deep, languid grinds when he reaches his own orgasm.

The roaring of Chuuya's pulse softly fades into that hazy afterglow, even if it's not as hazy and definitely not glowing, not when he realizes how stupid he is for allowing this again.

What if it's another game? Testing the lengths of Chuuya's naivety again?

The moment, Dazai pulls out, Chuuya scoots away, turning around to kick Dazai out once and for all, but —

Dazai looks just as upset as him.

The burst of panic in his chest wanes.

"Chuuya..."

"*Don't*," he mutters, reaching for a shirt, something to wipe himself off as he ignores the look on Dazai's face. The one that says so much despite revealing so little.

"You wanted honesty," Dazai says, "then don't turn away from it now."

"I wanted honesty because all you've been doing is lie to me."

"And I said I'm sorry."

"Yeah," Chuuya mutters, limping to his closet and facing away from him, "too bad it doesn't fix anything. This was a mistake."

"You always say that."

"Well, I'm going to say it again, so go away if you don't want to hear it."

He hears Dazai sigh, then the sound of his belt snapping back into place. "You were never entertainment. Everything but you."

Chuuya stills, squeezes his eyes shut.

"And maybe I fucked up my only shot at something real with you, but today Hayashi said you were in the hospital and everything else stopped mattering. All I could think about was how I would give anything —" Dazai sucks in a deep breath. "— anything in this world to make you stay in mine. So if all you want from me is this, then take it. I'm all yours."

Chuuya spins around. "You're not a fucking toy. Stop talking like that."

"I have nothing else to offer you."

How is it possible to hate someone so much yet love them at the same time? Chuuya wishes he could just cross the distance and shake Dazai until he turns blue, until he gets it into that thick skull of his that he's more than enough except —

Except that half an hour ago, it was Chuuya who told him that.

I love you.

That's not enough.

His hands clench by his sides. "Can you please just go? I'm tired. I need to sleep."

"Okay." Dazai grabs the doorknob.

Chuuya looks at the ceiling, eyes stinging. *Fuck*. "Wait." Silently, he

turns to Chuuya. "You never had to offer me anything. I wanted you. Just you. That's all it would have taken."

There.

That's it. That's all.

That's all it would have taken.

Past tense.

Passed chances.

Dazai knew that there would be no way to win back something as precious as someone's trust with one desperate confession, but somehow hearing it is even worse. Feels even worse. He scrubs a hand across his face as he passes the kitchen and only notices Hayashi lingering in the doorway when she calls his name. "Can we talk for a second?"

And *oh.*

Her expression? Wavering between him and the room he left seconds ago? Hayashi knows.

She knows.

Dazai shoves his hands into his pockets and waits for the anger, for the snarling accusations, but they never come. Instead, Hayashi offers him a tentative smile. "Don't make that face. I'm not going to tell anyone."

"You're not mad?"

"I mean," Hayashi makes a face, "could you have chosen literally any other person besides the au pair boy for your siblings? Probably. But I'm aware that sometimes we can't control these kinds of things. Sometimes they just happen."

Maybe she has known that Dazai wasn't the textbook definition of straight all along. Maybe she simply never mentioned it. Then again, she's always been good at keeping quiet.

For the first time in a long time, Dazai doesn't know what to say.

"Are you two okay?" Hayashi asks. “I sensed some... tension earlier."

"No," Dazai says. "I don't think we are."

"Oh. I'm sorry." She crosses her arms. "I didn't realize."

Dazai catches her gaze. "You're not going to tell my father?"

"It's not my place to have that conversation with him."

Perhaps not.

Perhaps it's what Dazai has wanted all along: being left alone.

"Okay," he finally replies, "I appreciate that. Make sure Chuuya rests? He's going to be stubborn and insist that he isn't in any pain, even if he is. Threaten to send him home if that's what it takes. But make him rest."

Hayashi's smile is small, a little sad, but she nods and doesn't prod for more information than Dazai is willing to give.

On the way to his car, he texts Chuuya that Hayashi knows. He gave a promise to be honest from now on, and he intends to keep it. He will not break it again. Or ever.

Chapter 26: Like We Should Have Done From the Start

Chapter Notes

warnings: mentions and talk of (child) abuse

Chuuya feels like he has been grounded. No straining activities. No long walks. No playing around with Diabolo. Hayashi doesn't even let him carry the damn grocery bags inside. And he knows that it's supposed to help him (and it does, somewhat), but he feels completely and utterly useless sitting on his ass all day. Especially after Dazai texted him that Hayashi apparently knows. About them and their thing. Past thing. *Something thing.*

She hasn't mentioned it, but every time they talk, Chuuya feels like *the why the hell did you fuck my step-son?* goes unsaid between them. Well, she'd probably word it differently, but the point still stands. On the phone — Chuuya called Dazai immediately after his cryptic *Hayashi knows* text — Dazai reassured him that she seemed fine with it, but surely she has something to say about it? Chuuya knows *he* would if it was his house and his children. Not that it will happen any time soon. It seems like he is destined to spend his life alone and miserable. Or, maybe he watched one starcrossed lovers movie too many on Netflix in the last few days, and —

There is a knock on his door.

"Chuuya-kun, the hospital is on the phone for you."

Oh.

Chuuya tosses his bag of chips aside, wipes his mouth, and scrambles to his feet. Hayashi's antsy expression mirrors the nervous flutter of his stomach when he opens the door and accepts the call. "Yes?"

The doctor, on the other side gets straight to the point. The pain is caused by nothing new. There's not much to be done except resting his ankle, try physical therapy, or eventually, surgery if therapy doesn't alleviate the symptoms.He should also consider a walking boot to help with daily activities. They are going to mail him a letter of referral to a specialist.

The whole time Chuuya is turned away from his host mother, not

wanting her to see the way his expression falls with each new second. He only really looks back after saying a quiet, "thank you" and hanging up.

"And?"

Chuuya shrugs weakly. "They can't really do that much. Physical therapy. Maybe surgery."

He doesn't even know where to begin worrying.

He's in Japan. Abroad. He's pretty sure his au pair insurance covered the hospital visit but — physical therapy? Surgery? That's not —

Chuuya presses the heel of his hand against his eye. He feels like he's going to be sick.

"Is it the pain again?" Hayashi touches his shoulder, guiding him back to his bed. "Sit down. Don't do anything that causes you even more pain."

"I'm fine," he says.

The look she sends him would be funny if he didn't feel like crying right now.

"I don't think my insurance will cover all of it," he eventually murmurs. "Not when I'm here." Not to mention that he'd use up more sick days than he has. It's still a job. Still a responsibility.

God, it sucks.

And it's all his own damn fault. If he had just —

His fingers clench and unclench, leaving crescent-shaped marks on his skin.

"I can talk to the au pair agency," Hayashi offers. "See what can be done, but Chuuya. If you need to leave home earlier than planned, no one will blame you. Your condition shouldn't be taken lightly. If you need to go home..." she presses out a sad smile. "... then we can arrange that. I'm sure there are ways out of the contract in cases like yours."

Home, huh?

Somehow, Chuuya had hoped he wouldn't have to worry about that

anymore after his father was released from the hospital, yet here he is, months later, facing the same damn issue.

"Maybe I can wait?" It's almost June. What difference is it going to make if he holds out for a

few more months?

"Don't take it the wrong way, Chuuya-kun, but you've already waited enough."

He waited — he ignored his own fucking body telling him to take it easy, and now he's facing a lifetime of chronic pain that he could have avoided. "I'll see the specialist first," Chuuya murmurs. Right now, he can't think past that. One baby step at a time.

"Of course."

Once the door falls shut, a suffocating silence falls over him.

He thought he'd have more time. *A little bit more time.*

The next day, he gets a call from Dazai. Chuuya considers ignoring him so he can eat the ramen in front of him in peace, but that part of him that always loses all logic when it comes to Dazai wearily accepts the call and holds his phone to his ear.

"What?"

"It's good to hear your voice as well." Chuuya doesn't reply, letting the silence speak for itself. "Okay. I see. I wanted to tell you that I'm organizing the dinner for my father's birthday this Friday. You're invited."

"Why in the world would you do that for him?"

"Reasons," Dazai says, and after a moment, a sigh comes from the other end of the line. "I'm going to play nice for as long as I can until the storm eventually hits. Consider it me buttering the cake."

"So what," Chuuya feels a frown tug on his brows, confused, "you're going to let Nobuko tell your father?" It doesn't exactly scare him even if Tsushima Gen'emon, from what Dazai told him, probably wouldn't be thrilled to hear about the au pair boy living under his roof has been fucking his son. He'll pop a few veins. Maybe even accuse Chuuya of being a bad influence or something as narrow-minded as that. No,

what Chuuya is downright terrified of is what that man will do to this own son because if the truth comes out, Dazai's going to be in more danger than him. And how sad is that?

"It's complicated, but rest assured that I have a plan. Not an ideal one, but it will do."

"You're working with Ranpo then?"

"Not quite."

That's... confusing, but also none of Chuuya's business even if, now more than ever, Dazai seems to take his promise of being honest with him serious. Chuuya doesn't know what to think of it. It's the right direction way too late. It's something he would have appreciated a month ago. Not now.

"You could have just texted me that, you know," Chuuya mutters as he shoves noodles back and forth, just like everything else in his life.

"Texting and driving is bad." As if on cue, the sound of a car honking blares in the background. It makes Chuuya lets out a soft snort before Dazai asks, "How is your ankle? Did the hospital call yet?"

Chuuya swallows. "Nope. Not yet."

"It's been over a week. You should call them yourselves. They're probably short-staffed."

"Yeah," Chuuya lies, his voice thick with all the words that go unsaid, "I guess I'll have to do that."

"But your pain?"

"It's fine."

"So it's not fine."

Dazai cares. It sounds like he cares. And right now, that's too much. Chuuya can't listen to Dazai be considerate and worry about him because it makes him want to leave everything standing, get into a cab, and drive over to his penthouse. It makes him physically ache with the need to tell Dazai everything and forget and —

More likely than not, Chuuya's going to be sitting on a plane back home by the end of next month. So no. He can't go anywhere anymore, but especially not to Dazai.

"Worry about your damn self," he snaps with a tone that's rough enough to make his lungs bleed. "I'm hanging up now." He doesn't let Dazai get another word in before pressing the red *end the call* button and returning to his ramen.

This god-awful dinner feels wrong in every possible way.

Chuuya hates sitting at a table, celebrating a man that forces his son into relationships that benefit no one except him. A man that talks to his son like he would talk to the shit stuck on the sole of his boot. And a man that would have his son violently shoved into a closet his whole life instead of ever letting him be who he really is. But most of all, Chuuya hates that Dazai is trying, genuinely, actively trying to do good right now, even if he claimed that it's part of some damn plan.

The restaurant is lovely. Classy. Family-oriented. Expensive. And the ride here as well as their reservation — everything worked out perfectly. His father even smiles at some point. Dazai has it down to a notch.

And it's so damn frustrating to watch this performance play out. Chuuya feels like he's a bird sitting in his cage as he watches the gigantic wave approach in the distance. (Once again, he feels fucking useless.)

"I think I'll take the duck," Hayashi muses to herself before glancing at her husband. "Have you picked?"

Chuuya fades out his answer in favor of glancing at Dazai. After their last phone call, they didn't talk anymore. Dazai gave him a smile when he picked the family up. Sometimes their eyes meet across the table. But other than that, it's been quiet. Dazai's gaze only lifts long enough to raise a silent brow before a waitress arrives, her short ponytail swinging from side to side as she stops in front of their table. Chuuya still hasn't picked his dish, but his attention redirects when he accidentally catches Tsushima looking up and going completely rigid.

Chuuya must not be the only one who notices since both Hayashi and Dazai shoot Tsushima a weird look. And when Chuuya's gaze darts back to the waitress… sure enough, her entire face flushes, a dark, traitorous red color that blossoms on her cheeks.

Oh.

Oh?

Chuuya connects the dots. At least, he thinks he does.

"Uh," the waitress stammers out, getting out her notepad and pen, "I'm Michiko and I'm going to take care of you for tonight. Call me over w-whenever you need something. Um, have you — oh —" Her pen clatters to the floor, and she scrambles to pick it up, her fingers shaking so hard Chuuya feels prickles of second-hand embarrassment. "— sorry! Where was I? Right. Does everyone know what they'll have to eat?"

Hayashi's eyes narrow, though she remains dead-silent. She even turns to her husband, cocking her head in a silent gesture for him to speak first.

Damn.

Tsushima clears his throat and picks up his menu, avoiding glancing at Machiko like the plague. "I'll have number forty-nine, please."

Michiko hums and writes it down. She does not look up again as she takes the rest of their orders. When she leaves, an awkward silence descends over the table so thick that Chuuya could grab the chopstick lying in front of him, slice it through the air, and eat that instead of the grilled chicken that he ordered. For now, he settles on picking up his wine glass. Even that feels like bursting the bubble of silence that has grown around them.

Because in the best-case scenario, they just happened to run into one of Tsushima's exes. In the worst-case scenario…

Chuuya swallows as his gaze flickers to Tsushima who — who casts a cold glance at Dazai.

Dazai who prepared this dinner for him.

Dazai who looked just as surprised to witness this awkward scenario unfold in front of him like everyone else.

Dazai who needs to play nice with his father now more than ever.

Sure, in some way, it might be odd that the very day Dazai happens to organize something for his father, this kind of coincidence happens, but —

Chuuya doesn't believe it's him who orchestrated it. Not this time. Not with everything that's at stake.

"Well," Dazai suddenly pierces the painful tension, "I'd like to make a toast."

For a few moments, Chuuya has the nagging fear that his father is going to stand up and demolish anything good and innocent about Dazai right here and now, that ugly frown line between his brows looking like it's going to pop any minute. Then Tsushima visibly schools his anger and wraps his fingers around his glass. (Chuuya hates how familiar that gesture looks. How often he saw Dazai do the same exact thing.) "Let's hear it then."

"Yeah," Hayashi adds, her smile anything but genuine, "I'm very excited to hear what you have to say about the man that you call your father."

"Fumiko," Tsushima warns.

"No, I want to hear it! Go on, Osamu. I'm all ears."

Even Dazai's cool mask of bottomless confidence wavers before he gets it under control and raises his glass of whiskey. "Today, I would like to talk about dedication." Next to Chuuya, Gin grips her glass of ice tea. Ryuu looks as excited as Chuuya feels. Not at all. "My father is a lot of things, but there is one undeniable truth above all, and that is his dedication to the things he wants in life and the refusal to back down against all odds." Chuuya blinks. Maybe he's putting too much thought into it, but Dazai doesn't sound mocking. No, it's because of how genuine he sounds that the words slice through the air like razors.

Dedicated. Yeah, Tsushima sure is dedicated to controlling and trampling all over his family members. If that's what it means, then Chuuya doesn't ever want to be associated with that word.

"Fifty-three years and counting, and the man has not lost an inch of his spirit." Dazai's eyes drag to his father, a sparkling ire in them. Tsushima's stare is cold, not sharing the sentiment. "If that's not admirable and worth celebrating, then what is, right?" Dazai's shoulders shrug enthusiastically. "Cheers."

"So admirable. Cheers to that," Hayashi mutters under her breath before downing her entire glass of wine in one go.

Her husband doesn't even look at her as he takes a careful sip of his scotch. Every flicker of expression on his hard features feels like a declaration of war — Chuuya drinks to that.

To say that the next sixty minutes of this dinner are uncomfortable would be an understatement. They're agonizingly long, nearly wordless, and at one point, Chuuya considers taking his chopstick and stabbing himself with it instead of enduring a second longer. Hayashi clearly has a lot to say, her expression bleeding into a glare every so often before she catches herself in front of Ryuu and Gin and says nothing at all. Tsushima has never been a grand talker either. Neither are the kids. It leaves Dazai and Chuuya, and well... he's really not in the mood to top this dinner by accidentally saying the wrong thing and making Tsushima suspicious. Not today. So he keeps his mouth shut, only joking around with Gin now and then.

The dam finally breaks when Hayashi sets her glass on the table with a smack and announces that she needs to use the restroom, except that instead of going there, she heads straight towards the poor waitress serving another table on the other side of the restaurant. Tsushima gets up to follow her. And for some insane reason, Dazai does too.

"Oi," Chuuya hisses, "don't —"

"This is going to escalate if I don't," Dazai replies, not nearly as concerned as he should be.

"It will escalate if you do! What do you even plan to say?!"

"Hayashi has the tendency to listen to me when she's angry with my father." Whatever the hell that means, it's all Dazai offers before straightening the collar of jet-black button-up shirt and striding towards the scene that is unfolding between Hayashi and Tsushima, her snapping words that Chuuya can't hear from his seat, and the latter trying to drag her away with a hand around her arm.

Dazai is wrong. His presence might help his stepmother, but it will only add fuel to his father's fire.

"Fuck," Chuuya mutters to himself before remembering there are two children next to him. Granted, they've clearly heard a lot worse than this. That doesn't mean he has to add to the list, though. "Your mommy and daddy just need to clear something up," he says with the fakest, widest grin he can manage. "Everything's all right."

"Are they going to get a divorce?" Ryuu asks.

Oh shit.

Chuuya scratches the back of his head. "Uh, maybe, but I wouldn't

worry about that. Whatever they decide to do in the end — it will be for the best."

God, he sucks at this.

Gin tilts her head. "What's a divorce?"

"When a family breaks apart," her brother replies before Chuuya can, "they give their children away."

"They are going to gib us away?!"

"No!" Chuuya hurries to say, but Gin's eyes are already filling with tears. Jesus fucking christ. "No, no, no. No one's giving you away. Hey, it's okay. You're not — your parents are not giving you away."

"I don't wanna go back there!" Gin cries.

Chuuya bundles her up in his arms and awkwardly pets her hair. "Sometimes two people separate because it's what's best for them, but that doesn't mean that you're going anywhere. Really, you would hardly even notice any changes!" Not with a man like Tsushima as their father.

"But Jinko said his parents separated and gave him away," Ryuu tells him with an accusing glare. Underneath that anger, he looks scared, though. Obviously. He's just as terrified of going back to that unstable childhood, never having anything to call home, never having anyone to call family. Chuuya knows that all too well. "His parents separated and gave him away!"

"Your mother would never do that to you," Chuuya says and then gives both of them a smile that he hopes looks encouraging.

Gin sniffles, wipes at her eyes. "What about Diabolo? Will he stay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, Diabolo will stay."

Across from them, someone sits down, and Chuuya turns to see Hayashi using a napkin to clean up a bit of smeared mascara around her eyes. Her sour face immediately turns into concern when she sees Gin's tears and Ryuu's scowl, her brows drawing up into surprise and guilt and something so loving that Chuuya has no doubt she'd rather die before giving up her kids.

"Oh, babies, no! What's wrong?"

But his pulse spikes anyway because if she is here...

Chuuya's only half-present as he explains why they're upset, his eyes already roaming the restaurant for one person and one person only.

There.

It's hard not to stare as several feet away, Chuuya can see Tsushima hammer down on Dazai like a sledgehammer, yelling, grabbing his neck and pushing and pushing and —

With a sharp inhale, Chuuya turns away because it's the only goddamn way that he can stay in his seat. He wants to go over there and deck Tsushima, but he knows — even if he hates it — that he can't, not without sabotaging Dazai's fucking insane plans — whatever it is that he cooked up once again.

As he looks at Hayashi, pointedly turned away from the scene, acting like her husband isn't currently demolishing all of his son's efforts for his own mistakes and marital problems, Chuuya suddenly and bitterly understands why Dazai has developed a disliking for her.

She keeps looking away.

How many times has she looked away when Tsushima did this? How many times could she have stepped in instead of turning around and sipping her wine? How much of Dazai could she have salvaged with a few fucking words?

Chuuya lets out a deep breath and counts to ten, willing the red color clouding his vision to disappear, willing to wait and look away as well but —

That has never been something he’s good at.

Excusing himself under his breath, he gets to his feet and heads straight for the collision zone. Tsushima’s hateful, angry words reach his ears as soon as he is close enough — *disappointing, irresponsible, immature* — but they only confirm that he has made the right decision when he stood up.

Dazai’s back is facing him, so he only notices Chuuya approaching when Tsushima’s eyes flicker to him, fleeting and clearly dismissive.

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” Chuuya forces himself to say, the words feeling like lead on his tongue, “but Dazai, Yosano-san called and said

she really needs to talk to you. It sounds really important."

"I —" Dazai's expression ranges from surprised to terrified all of a sudden before he looking right into his father's eyes, shoulders still easily pulled back as he speaks. "I have to get this, but give her a day or two and she will calm down, and I promise it was an unfortunate coincidence. I only came here because I thought it was your favorite place to eat, not anything else." Then he's already turning away, ushering Chuuya through the restaurant but not back to the table with a palm on his back that no one sees but Chuuya.

Dazai is already debating whether he should make a direct phone call to either Ranpo or his best friend, not because of what Chuuya said, that was a stupid, dangerous lie to get him away, but to ask whether tonight's events can be accounted to them when the door of the restroom falls closed behind them.

"Don't do that," he says as soon as they're alone. "Don't give my father a reason to notice you. Please."

Chuuya replies with a cold, unimpressed glare as he leans against the sink. "If you think I'm just going to stand there and watch him do that to you, then you're insane."

Dazai knows he should insist harder — after all, has his entire downfall not started when he decided that keeping Chuuya as far away from Tsushima Gen'emon was and would be his first priority? Instead, though, he finds himself too stunned to speak for a moment.

He is used to people looking away, not… the opposite. Not like that.

"It wasn't you, was it?"

"No," Dazai says eventually, turning the faucet on to wash his hands — and buy some time to school crack in his mask. "I have the strong suspicion my dear friends had something to do with it, considering I had the amazing idea to go to this restaurant because of Akiko."

"Yeah," Chuuya sighs. "I figured."

Ranpo did say he wouldn't stop the manhunt for his father on his birthday. Because he's fucking stubborn and has never had anyone say no to him and because he thinks Dazai is being stupid.

Well, Dazai thinks Ranpo has miscalculated the situation.

He's not surprised to see Akiko join Ranpo's ranks, but it — it stings. It's Dazai's father they're trying to bring down. He should have a say in this, right? Maybe then he could avoid situations like these.

Having Gen'emon think that Dazai intentionally arranged tonight's chaos isn't the worst accusation that has ever been thrown his way. He'll survive. Not to mention that the man should have been fucking careful if he wanted to have an affair so badly. (Dazai *was* with his fake relationship.) It is annoying, though.

"It's not the end of the world, in the grand scheme of things," he says. "My father might not like me very much, but he, of all people, should be smart enough to conclude that I can't afford to pay these kinds of pranks on him. He'll just have to chalk it up to coincidence."

On the other end of the room, Chuuya looks… Dazai squints. Chuuya looks furious. Of all the things to be, he is angry. "It's not about liking, Dazai. Your father — he's abusive."

Dazai snorts. What a funny little word. "I'm twenty-two years old, Chuuya. I'm an adult. My father isn't abusing me." Strongly disliking him? Yes. Blaming him for his mother's suicide? Yes. But not —

"How old were you the first time he started yelling at you for shit you can't control?"

The memories are vague but distinct. It was when his mother was still alive; struggling, but alive. Dazai remembers his father yelling at him for being so different. Homeroom teachers calling because he was always alone. Sleepless nights that kept his mother awake as well. Sudden outbursts of bottomless rage. He was five.

Dazai prefers to act like he didn’t hear the question.

"How old were you the first time he grabbed your neck like that, huh?" Chuuya continues, eyes a blazing inferno.

Seven years old. Dazai was crying at his mother's funeral. His father wrenched him to the side and told him that nothing of that would have happened if he just had turned out to be a normal kid. If he hadn't put his mother under so much pressure. Dazai can still feel the imprint of his hand around his neck, so hard and cold as rain poured down from the lifeless, grey sky above.

"You made your point," Dazai finally says with a thin smile. "What are you getting at now?"

Chuuya lets out a sigh, driving a hand through his hair. "My point is that... fuck, I don't even know. I hate seeing him do this to you over and over, so let me help."

"Help?"

"Yeah. You said you have a plan in mind? Let me help. I live in his house. I can talk to Hayashi."

"And you have more to lose than me," Dazai points out, "so no. I'm not going to put you in his line of fire."

"I'm not going to be in any danger."

"You live —"

"Not for much longer. So it doesn't matter, okay? Let me do this while I still can."

Dazai's brows tug into a frown. He has the eerie, creeping suspicion that Chuuya isn't telling him something here. *Not for much longer?* "Four months seems long to me," he replies, then takes a step forward. "Chuuya. What aren't you telling me?"

Chuuya's mouth stutters open and closed before he lets out a weak breath. "I'm probably going home sooner than planned."

Oh.

Dazai blinks. His chest feels empty.

Oh.

"Your ankle?"

Chuuya nods, looking at the ground. "I might need surgery. Physical therapy. All that. I can't do it here. Insurance will only cover so much."

Dazai's first reaction is to offer to pay. Anything he needs, whether it's a surgery that costs more than his entire bar, or a four-month stay in the hospital, or literally the moon. Dazai would find the money and give it all to him, make him stay here somehow. (Because he isn't ready for Chuuya to leave. Not yet. Not ever.)

But then he looks at Chuuya, really looks at him, and —

Chuuya wasn't lying when he said that Dazai ruined him. In place of that endless, sunny intensity, energy seems to be leaking out of him. Drop by drop. There are dark circles under his eyes. Chuuya looks exhausted.

And Dazai is horrified.

He knows all about undoing people with the right words, knows all about seeing inside someone and breaking them from within. He just never thought that he'd end up doing it to someone he loves. No matter how much Dazai wants him to stay, the simple truth is that the best place for Chuuya is as far away as possible from Dazai. Back with his parents. A place that makes sure he'll take care of himself and not drive him to a physical collapse.

"You're leaving," Dazai says to make himself hear it, to try to get used to the new reality in which Chuuya will be on the other side of the fucking world. "When?"

Chuuya takes a few steps closer, shrugging listlessly. "I haven't made any final calls yet. I still need to see the specialist. I'll see how it goes, then decide." His gaze drifts over the tangible space between them, over the fingers that he's trailing across the shiny porcelain of the sinks, and up to Dazai. "So, for once in your damn life, Osamu, let someone help you."

Osamu.

Dazai doesn't think he's ever heard him say his name like that.

Dazai doesn't think he's ever liked someone say his name this much.

When he finally finds his voice, it's to ask a simple question. Probably the most important one of his life. "Why would you do that? I thought you hated me."

"No one likes a know-it-all, asshole."

"Apparently, you do."

"No, I still despise you," Chuuya hisses; the fire in his eyes is new, not destructive but hot and heavy, especially when he plants a hand on Dazai's chest, pushing. "I just want to see the man that's half-responsible for ruining something that I really fucking wanted burn. Are you going to make that man burn?"

"Yes," Dazai breathes out.

"Then we'll do it together," Chuuya decides, "like we should have done from the start."

Then Chuuya pushes him into one of the stalls, the sound of the door barely audible over the ferocity of their bodies crashing together, like they were born to do only this, like this is what it was supposed to be like from the very start and for the rest of their feeble lives.

If that's what accepting help means, then Dazai thinks he can live with it.

Chapter 27: Être

Chapter Notes

warnings: mentions and discussion of past child abuse, emotional abuse, physical abuse

Later — not too much because Hayashi, angry and upset so shortly after her unresolved fight with his father, must be waiting for them — Chuuya, in the middle of zipping up his pants, asks, "So how exactly does your plan look like?"

Step one:

Nobuko Sasaki smirks at him like she won the jackpot when she delicately raises a cup of coffee to her mouth as if she doesn't have claws for fingers.

Luckily, Dazai knows a thing or two about claws.

"I was surprised to hear from you," she finally says. "I was under the impression you wanted nothing to do with me."

"I would rather talk to the shit stuck to my shoe than you," Dazai's savage smile only gets wider when she blanches, "but I ran into a friend of yours a while ago. Greasy hair. Pale as a sheet of paper. Does it ring any bells?"

"Dostoevsky? Hm, yes. He sure had a lot of interesting things to say." Nobuko draws circles into the table before glancing up at him, lashes fluttering. "Does your daddy know what you and that au pair boy of yours have been doing behind closed doors all this time?"

And there it is.

Dazai considered scooting around the subject. He considered acting swayed by Nobuko's nonexistent charms. But she got this far already. He doubts she'd be stupid enough to believe that Dazai actually wants something to do with her.

"He doesn't. You're planning to change that, I assume?"

Across from him, her self-assured grin bleeds into a puzzled frown for glorious three seconds before she smooths it out and schools her

surprise. Dazai's strongest suit has never been his brain itself — although he is a rather brilliant specimen for his age — but all the creative assumptions people make about it. Everyone always thinks he's ten steps ahead. In reality, he's only five steps ahead, yet they give him the remaining other half for free.

"My," Nobuko finally says, "so serious. You're not even going to deny the claim?"

Dazai leans back in his seat. "I'm a busy man, so I would rather not waste my time avoiding the elephant in the room. You have something of mine that's supposed to stay under wraps. And I clearly have something you want. So state your conditions."

Nobuko crosses her arms, gaze focused as she most likely considers how far she can push it. "When are you opening your bar?"

"July 15th."

Two weeks.

That's his time slot. Two weeks of walking the fine line. Two weeks of tolerating Nobuko. In the grand scheme of things, it's nothing.

"I want to be at the opening party," she says. "As your girlfriend."

Dazai tilts his head lazily. "Anything else?"

"You will introduce me before that, of course. Several outings with me --"

An object. That is what he is to her. To his father. To most people around him. Something to be used. And even though something tangible and distinct, like a layer of skin, slips away from him, Dazai still listens to her demands. After all, everything in this world has a price, and it rarely comes in the form of shiny jewelry.

"This step fucking sucks," Chuuya announces as soon as Dazai slides into the car.

"You don't even have to do anything. Don't get bratty."

"Bratty —" Chuuya stops slurping on his iced coffee only to glower daggers at him. "It sucks because I can't do anything. And because — because you shouldn't be fucking selling yourself to her like that. You're not some damn piece of furniture."

"Hm, and here I thought that I would make a fine massage chair."

"Your sarcasm isn't as slick as you think it is."

Not anymore. They've dug holes too deep inside each other to fall for that. The only thing revealing that Dazai is, in fact, irritated is the way he unconsciously scratches at the bandages around his wrists as he waits for an opening to pull out of the side street. "It is the plan, Chuuya. Either I sell myself to her, or she sells me out to my father."

Chuuya lets out an irritated sigh. "I know. That doesn't mean that I'm going to pretend to like it. As soon as —" His lips press together, fingers clenching and unclenching into fists before he forces himself to take it easy. *Easier*. "As soon as this is all over, I'm going to fight her."

Dazai has the audacity to snort.

Chuuya scowls. "I'm serious."

"As soon as this is over," Dazai says, his voice too soft for the blow that he delivers with his next words, "you won't be here anymore."

Chuuya takes a loud sip of his drink to cover up the sound of his stuttered inhale. There really is no need for that reminder. It's the first thing on his mind every morning he wakes up. It's the only thing on his mind now as they drive to that doctor he got referred to. It's the thing on his mind whenever he sees Dazai, whenever they repeat their most favorite mistake over and over again.

"And thank god for that," Dazai adds. "Explaining to your parents why you got arrested is still not on my to-do list."

Chuuya glances at him from the corner of his eye.

Thank god, you will be.

He isn't a stranger to jokes, especially from Dazai, but there is a ravenous, festering knot lodged between his ribs that keeps whispering that this is all still part of a game, insisting that Dazai will be genuinely happy once he's gone.

Even if *Chuuya* dragged him into that bathroom stall and yanked down his pants. Even if *Chuuya* was the one to offer his help. Even if Dazai has nothing to gain from chauffeuring him around.

That knot, however, sits too deep to rip it out with sheer logic.

"My dads would high-five me if they knew I fought someone like that."

"Hm. By the way, did you ever tell them about..." Dazai doesn't look at him, but he makes a hand gesture that could mean anything. "...you know."

"About what?"

"About what I did?"

"Oh, that." Chuuya turns his head to gaze out of the window, watching the streets pass by. "Not really. I think they probably figured something must have happened when I suddenly stopped mentioning you, but if you're asking whether they know how you stood me up and then lied and said that I've been just your silly play thing all along, then no. I did not."

He takes a deep breath. Wow. This felt good.

"I guess I deserve that," Dazai murmurs next to him.

They arrive in front of the orthopedic clinic that, among other things, specializes in athletic injuries. Once Dazai cuts the engine, he doesn't make any move to get out yet, so Chuuya doesn't either, waiting for whatever it is that he's about to say.

"Do you want me to wait here?"

Unbuckling his seatbelt, he takes his sweet time considering the question. He's not sure *how* he ended up with Dazai driving him here. Maybe it's because he has yet to tell any of his friends about how bad his ankle has gotten. Maybe because Hayashi currently has enough on her plate without driving him around. Maybe it's simply convenient. They were talking about Dazai's meeting with Nobuko; he mentioned that it's downtown, and Chuuya mentioned that he has an appointment the same day, and well, one thing led to another, and now they're here, together. It feels oddly normal. (In another life, Chuuya thinks, he could get used to it.) Or, maybe Chuuya simply doesn't want to do this alone.

"No," is the word that finally comes out of him, "come with me." *Please.*

Without any hesitation whatsoever, Dazai nods.

Despite his appointment, they still have to wait nearly twenty minutes

in the waiting room. Chuuya spends the entire time trying not to pick his fingernails. Two other people are sitting across from them, so there's not much room for them to talk, but Dazai taps his shoulder now and then to show him memes on his phone. A feeble attempt at distraction even if Chuuya does crack a smile or two. When his name finally gets called, Chuuya doesn't let himself overthink before grabbing the hem of Dazai's button-up, a wordless plea that Dazai once again listens to without so much as a teasing remark.

The young doctor, who introduces herself as doctor Hayakawa is friendly and professional, doing a closer examination of his ankle, taking measurements for a leg boot, and finally discussing options. There is no miracle solution. Only things he has already heard before. Physical therapy to work on gaining back some of the mobility that he's lost in the last year. She says she wouldn't recommend surgery right away. Then they try out the leg boot.

Chuuya feels silly as he hobbles through the room like a toddler learning to walk, letting his regret for having brought Dazai here wash over him in waves until he actually takes a look at Dazai's expression and sees nothing but... pride? It's not a logical thing to feel. Chuuya has done nothing except ruin his own body. It's his own fucking fault, and here Dazai is —

He has to force his gaze away.

It's too much for right now, too heavy for the thin ice they're treading, but that regret melts away into something warm and sweet in the pit of his stomach — a single ray of sunshine cutting through the dark and suffocating clouds.

Afterwards, it's silent.

Chuuya waited before booking any flights, hanging onto the last shred of hope even if he didn't want to admit it, but now? There is no reason to wait anymore. Doctor Hayakawa told him that he should start with therapy as soon as possible. Chuuya considered trying to pay out of his own pocket, but each session would cost him between one hundred and three hundred in euros. He doesn't have that much money.

There is nothing left to do here except going home.

Inside the car, Chuuya bites his lip. "Can you... can we wait for five minutes? I want to call my dads."

Dazai's fingers still around the key. He leans back in the seat and nods. "Of course."

And so, with Dazai next to him, Chuuya fishes out his phone and dials Paul's number, each new breath like a punch to the face.

"Hey, dad..."

Step two:

Chuuya checks the time on his phone for the sixth time, his pulse beating at a steady but merciless pace.

In front of him, Gin and Ryuu are in ballet clothes. Both of them. Hayashi's taking pictures, overflowing with pride even if their movements are clumsy and awkward at times. That will ebb away with time, though; Chuuya wasn't a natural talent from the get-go either. He's been wanting to discuss Ryuu starting dancing lessons with his host mother for ages now, but as it is, today turned out to be the perfect opportunity to cause problems.

Dazai has his plans, but so does Chuuya, so he suggested that he work on Hayashi. Dazai agreed. It was clear that he wasn't happy with it. Not when it involves Tsushima, but, in the end, they both knew that it wouldn't stop him anyway.

Hayashi's marriage with Tsushima has been hanging by a thread for a while now. As far as Chuuya's aware, it started when Tsushima bluntly refused to see his children's teacher with his wife, which led to a week of loud shouting matches and Chuuya having the misfortune of ending up at the end of Hayashi's drunk rants about her uncaring husband.

Though, Chuuya's sure that's only what triggered the situation; the root lies much deeper — to be more precise, in Tsushima's personality. Every marriage would crumble after a certain time if your partner is a cruel, abusive bigot. Their newest squabble is that waitress from the restaurant. So the two of them are back to a cold, passive-aggressive war at home, refusing to speak to each other. All it would really take to tip Hayashi over the point of no return in her marriage is one event. One feather-light push of a finger. After everything that Tsushima got away with, Chuuya is more than happy to do the pushing, even if his method can be considered somewhat unethical.

Somewhat.

"Smile for the camera!" Hayashi says.

The click of the front door opening comes from the foyer — Chuuya's spine tenses on the couch. A moment later, Tsushima crosses the living room, a trip to his office that usually happens without any pauses except this time, his steps halt, gaze narrowing on his children doing ballet. On his son.

Hayashi notices, only to shoot him a raised brow. "What, Gen'emon?"

The kids stop practicing. That's the only part Chuuya is genuinely sorry about, the only part that he hates doing. He braces himself to take them upstairs and distract them with something loud so they won't ever hear the thoughts that probably cross the man's mind but —

"What is this?" Tsushima asks.

Hayashi looks genuinely confused, and Chuuya's torn between feeling pity and contempt. Surely, she knew what kind of man she was marrying, right?

No, that's not entirely fair. Words can be awfully deceiving.

"Ryuu decided he wants to pick up ballet lessons as well. Chuuya-kun said he could be really..." She trails off as Tsushima's gaze flickers to Chuuya.

The man is intimidating, no doubt. Everything about him screams money, power and control, and fuck, even illegal shit. Chuuya's sure if Tsushima wanted to, he could ruin his future with the snap of a finger. But all Chuuya sees when he stares back at him is a man so deeply unhappy with himself that he stains everything he touches. He's not strong. Just pathetic. Chuuya wordlessly cocks his head and folds his fingers over his knee.

"You —" Tsushima's lips curl in apparent disgust, but before he can even step forward, Hayashi grabs his arm with so much force, he almost stumbles back.

"Gen'emon! What the hell is wrong with you?"

The question is, what the hell isn't?

Chuuya feels his heart race, but every ex- and inhale is steady, feels good. He's not scared. He's fucking pissed.

"What's wrong with *me*?" Tsushima hisses. "What's wrong with you? What's wrong with that per—"

"That's enough!"

"Hey," Chuuya gets up and grabs the children by their shoulders, guiding them far, far away from that man and out into the backyard. They're in dancing clothes, but the sun's shining in all its glory anyway. "Let's practice outside, yeah? How does that sound?"

"I don't wanna practice..." Gin's shoulders sag.

"That's fine. You can bask in the sun? Or play on the swing?"

"I'd like to swing," she mumbles and sets off as soon as they're outside.

Ryuu remains by Chuuya's side, his face blank of any emotions as he blinks up at him. "They're really not going to give us away?"

"No, Ryuu. Never. Your mother wouldn't do that."

"Is it bad that I like dancing?"

Chuuya smiles as he kneels down. "Not at all. Dancing is the most beautiful thing in the world. Why would that ever be bad?"

Ryuu shrugs listlessly.

"Listen," Chuuya says, grabbing his shoulders, "do you like dancing? Does it make you happy?"

"... I guess."

"Then everything else doesn't matter. As long as you're doing what you like, it's something good."

It's probably not the best advice, Chuuya has never been that good with putting his feelings into words, but it's what he would have liked to hear when he was eight and started dancing instead of learning it the hard way.

When Dazai comes in through the backyard, Chuuya sees something he thought he'd never see in this year too. He warily looks at both Gin and Ryuu before stopping and ruffling their hair. "Hey, kiddos. You okay?"

Gin doesn't even bat an eyelash. Ryuu, on the other hand... he stares

up at his brother like god himself just came down to greet him. The smile Dazai shoots him is hesitant, awkward, and if it wasn't so goddamn sad, Chuuya would burst out laughing. As it is, he watches from his seat on one of the lawn chairs, then crosses his arms and leans back as Dazai finally turns and approaches him instead.

"Oh, wow, so you do know you have siblings."

Dazai rolls his eyes. "Careful, Chuuya. You're getting too cocky."

"I'm the exact right amount of cocky I need to be."

"Are you all right?" Dazai asks, apparently choosing to ignore him. "Did he do —"

Chuuya holds up his hands. "I'm fine. They were still yelling at each other last time I checked."

Dazai's eyes travel past him, expression grim. "I'll check on Hayashi."

Because this is what counts. Once the storm hits, having Hayashi's support could turn the ship in Dazai's favor. It could mean everything.

Chuuya waits and faintly wonders how his au pair year turned into a fucking telenovela full of lies, and drama, and scandals. (And still. If he had the choice, he'd come to Yokohama anyway.)

A few minutes pass, then the glass doors behind him slide open, angry voices approaching. "— to not even bother to spend time with his children, and then turn around and complain! Can you believe that?"

"Yes," Dazai replies calmly, "I can."

"And about such irrelevant things as well! So what if Ryuu wants to dance? Where's the harm in that?!" Hayashi lets out an angry breath before turning to Chuuya, anger melting into an apologetic frown. "I'm so sorry, Chuuya-kun. Please believe me. Our household is open to anyone regardless of sexual orientation or a damn hobby! I genuinely don't know what has gotten into him!"

Chuuya would reply, but he sees Dazai behind her and —

This was never supposed to be about Chuuya. Dazai should be the one hearing the apology.

"It's the same man you married ten years ago, Hayashi-san."

She turns to him. "He wasn't — he wasn't always like this. He used to care about his family. It's his damn work and all the stress. He used to be better."

Dazai's smile is the worst thing Chuuya has seen all day. "Then I guess I was never part of that family."

"Don't say that," Hayashi replies so automatically that it's obvious she does not really think about what Dazai's even trying to point out. "Of course, you are."

"Is that so? Because I remember father shaving off my hair the moment it grew past my chin. Where was your *we're open to everyone* speech then? You told me it looked good. That it looked *better*."

Chuuya can't see Hayashi when her back is turned to him, but her silence is pretty damning.

"I remember my father forcing me into a relationship at the age of twelve after I repeatedly said that I didn't want that. Were you not living in the same house when we fought about it over and over?"

Chuuya feels like he shouldn't be here hearing all this, the weight of Dazai's words pressing down on him like the entire cosmos itself.

What the fuck.

"Was I really part of the family when I overdosed, and everyone acted like I was just a silly teenager experimenting with drugs?"

"Y-you were partying a lot," Hayashi stammers out. "Never home. Gen'emon said that it was just a phase —"

"Yes," Dazai's laugh is humorless, "I'm sure he told you a lot of things, but come on, you were there. You always saw. I mean, what do you think these bandages are for? Do you think they are a fashion statement?"

"You never told me any of this," Hayashi says quietly.

Dazai never loses his cool, but even Chuuya can feel it, the frustration rolling off him in waves. It's as if every word passes straight through her. As if he hasn't said anything at all. "You never asked."

Hayashi lifts her hand to rub at her temple, shaking her head. "I wanted to, but — but you were always so withdrawn. I thought you

didn't want me to try to replace your mother, so..." So she never even tried.

"I was a child."

Chuuya's eyes burn, but he forces himself to sit still in his seat, barely even breathing around the knot in his chest.

Dazai doesn't let her reply. "And so are they," he adds, glancing at Ryuu and Gin, who are huddled around the pond, sticking their fingers into the water. "Do them a favor, and don't let them grow up the same way."

Hayashi lets herself fall down into a seat and massages her temple. "Your father is going to sleep at the hotel for a while." Then she looks up. "What about you? Your bar —"

"— is going to open just as planned. I'm working on things. I need you to be on my side in case anything happens. For once, Hayashi-san. Please."

"What exactly are you planning, Osamu?"

Dazai's eyes find Chuuya's, and for a second, they share the same awful knowledge of the lengths Dazai will have to go through to finally slip out of his father's grip once and for all.

"That," Dazai says, "is too sensitive of a information to share now."

Step three:

"They're going to come. Don't worry."

"I know they're going to come. That is the reason why I'm worried."

Chuuya rolls his eyes. "They're your friends who want to help you, Dazai. Is that really so bad?"

"The leg boot is supposed to help you too, and I don't see you wearing it."

"Stop deflecting, asshole."

"You're the one who is de—" Dazai's words cut off when he sees a familiar pair strolling through the diner and towards the booth that he and Chuuya are occupying. Ranpo only looks smug, but Akiko's eyes

narrow when she sees the two of them. Next to each other. No blood in sight — physical blood, at least.

"Finally," Ranpo says as he slides into the seat across from him, "I've been waiting for this one."

Akiko clicks her tongue and waves her index finger from Dazai to Chuuya. "I'll need an explanation for this, darlings. Are you two back tog—"

"No," the two of them say in unison. Chuuya lets out an annoyed huff, but Dazai has the odd desire to smile.

"And we were never together," Chuuya adds.

"Yes, you only fucked like you were together, acted like you were together, and had feelings for each other like you were together," Ranpo ever-so-helpfully points out with a nonchalant shrug. "That makes so much sense."

Chuuya turns to Dazai, looking this close to jumping over the table and strangle a certain someone. "Okay. I get now why you didn't want them here."

"Rude," Ranpo says flatly.

The reason Dazai had to be bribed to make this call isn't that simple, though. He can handle a bit of teasing. What he cannot take is the pity in their eyes when he involves them in the scheme. What he absolutely cannot handle is the realization that, after all this time, Dazai failed to save himself. What he cannot handle are all the complicated, overwhelming emotions that come with the support of people he cares about.

He doesn't need it — at least, that's what he has been telling himself his whole life now.

"So," Akiko says, leaning back in her seat, "speak."

"I don't want you to bring down my father with whatever scandal you found," he finally says. "Not entirely, at least. I want you to help me bring him down by using the very thing that he's best at it. I want us to use me."

The four of them are on a mission, on their merry way to commit a

crime, and Akiko pulls him aside, slowing their pace so that a few good feet lie between Chuuya and Ranpo ahead of them.

"What exactly are you doing?" Akiko asks, her elbow linking with him.

"I told you we —"

"No, not the plan — even though I do have concerns about that as well. I mean, you and your little redhead. You're fucking again, aren't you?"

Dazai's collar feels a little tight around his throat, so he tugs at it as he frowns to himself. "Is it that obvious?"

His best friend snorts. "The only times you two get along is when you're messing around. No happy middles." Dazai wonders if that's a healthy sign of a relationship. Probably not. Not that it matters, anyway. "You do still have feelings for him, right?"

Dazai doesn't answer.

"As far as I remember, he had them for you as well. That's why he was so fucking hurt. So what are you two doing?"

"We can't just bounce back to where we were before everything happened."

"Says who?"

"Common sense?"

"More like, common idiocy." Akiko tugs at the obnoxiously high ponytail on her head — her disguise along with the darkened sunglasses. As much as Dazai appreciates her participation and concerns, the next week is already going to be messy enough without worrying about his relationship status with Chuuya. "You managed to bounce back to fucking without any problems as it seems."

"It's not the same. We're not... we're not friends anymore. He hasn't forgiven me." Perhaps he never will.

"Oh my god. Do you truly believe he'd be here right now if he wasn't your friend?"

“He wants to help me. Different matter entirely. And, by the way, there are other things. He's going to be back in Paris soon." Much sooner than Akiko and Ranpo know. "It's complicated."

"It always is with the two of you." Her hand wraps around his and squeezes. "I just wanted to remind you what happened last time you two decided to keep it casual, all right? I don't want either of you to end up like that again."

Dazai only has time to nod because in front of them towers his former workplace and his father's glory. *The Setting Sun Hotel.*

Chuuya has been to *the Setting Sun* exactly two times.

Once, when he met Dazai here after a shopping tour with Kouyou, so they could drive back to his penthouse together. And, another time when they had a very adventurous, high-risk date in Dazai's office — *somewhere high, high above on the top floor,* Chuuya thinks as they pass a few storage rooms after coming inside through the service entrance. He still remembers the exhilarating rush of blood pumping through his veins when Dazai pressed him against the glass wall and fucked him right there and t—

Chuuya blinks and subconsciously glances at Dazai. Dazai's eyes are already on him. His expression betrays nothing, a perfect mask of control and nonchalance. For all Chuuya knows, they might be thinking about the same exact thing... even if sex flashbacks should be the last thing on their minds right now.

Focus.

Tugging at the hat on his head that covers most of his very recognizable hair, Chuuya directs his attention back to the task at hand, which is hacking into the hotel system's security cameras, specifically into the one of Tsushima Gen'emons office. He doesn't know much about hacking, but he has seen enough spy movies in his life to make sure that Dazai and Ranpo will have enough time and cover to take over the hard part.

Dull, throbbing pain occasionally flares through his leg, so he tries to put less weight on it. He has yet to use the leg boot — it just makes him feel silly — but he did use the heel lift he got from the doctor as well. It's probably not as helpful as the leg boot, but it's better than nothing.

"Okay," Dazai says once the four of them step into the elevator, "does everyone know what to do?"

"I'm the french man whose girlfriend is dying," Chuuya replies.

"The dying girlfriend in question," Yosano says.

"Brain number one of the operation," Ranpo provides.

Dazai's frown can be only be described as grumpy. Then he gives each of them a look, his eyes lasting on Chuuya. The air in the elevator buzzes with anticipation. "I'm brain number two then. French man: we will wait for your signal. What is the signal?"

Chuuya's lips twitch. "Ah, la vache."

"Ah, la vache it is then," Dazai repeats with the tiniest of smirks. The doors slide open. "See you on the other side."

They all split into different directions.

Earlier, Dazai explained where to find the room with all the security footage, although it would be hard to miss anyway as Chuuya reaches the end of the hallway and stops in front of a door with the words "DO NOT ENTER" on it. Chuuya takes a deep breath through his nose, puts on his acting face, and then starts all but harassing the door with his fist. "Hello! I need help! Someone help me!"

It swings open a minute later, a man in a black suit frowning down at him. "You're not allowed —"

"My girlfriend," Chuuya exclaims in french. "She's dying! You need to help me!"

"Sir, I do not speak French. What —"

Chuuya grabs the man's wrist and starts tugging him along before switching to a badly pronounced English. "My girlfriend is dying! Help me!"

"D-dying? What do you mean dying?"

"Just help me already, you useless fuck," Chuuya snaps in french, barely stifling the laughter that threatens to burst out at the way the man's eyes grow wide.

"All right, all right —"

Once they round the corner, Chuuya sees Yosano, just as planned, spread out on the floor, and he falls to his knees as soon as they reach her, shaking her shoulders in an over-dramatic fashion. "Wake up, Lucie! Wake up! Don't you die on me!"

The security man looks like he was thrown into a cage of wolves without any warning when he kneels down to feel the pulse on her neck, a drop of sweat rolling down his temple. "I — What happened? Did she just lose consciousness?"

"I don't know. One moment, she was okay. Then she fell," Chuuya says in English again. "Ah, la vache! It's your damn floors! So shiny and smooth! I should be suing you for this!"

At the word *suing*, the man's skin pales even whiter, and he wipes a trembling hand over his forehead. "Uh, I - we apologize, of course. Uh, this is my first day on the job. I don't really know... Have you called an ambulance yet?"

"Ambulance?" Chuuya echoes. "What is an ambulance? I don't know any ambulance! My name is Theo!"

"No," the security man says, shaking his head, "ambulance. Nine, nine, one?!"

"I'm twenty-three years old!" Chuuya exclaims.

"Ah, shit. I'll just —" The man scrambles for his phone, almost letting it drop as his gaze darts back to the "unconscious" girl on the floor. "Let me —"

It makes sense to call the ambulance, but Chuuya can't let that happen because Yosano's not unconscious. They really don't want to attract more attention than necessary. Five minutes is all they need.

"Lucie, darling," Chuuya pleads even if it's supposed to be a demand, "wake up."

On cue, Yosano's eyelids flutter open, and her head lolls a bit as she looks at the two of them. Chuuya has to leave it to her. It's a good performance.

"What-what happened?" Yosano makes a show of looking around in confusion, the palm of her hand rubbing at her head.

"You fell," Chuuya provides and turns to shoot a nasty look at the poor security man, "because of your shiny ass floors. Don't you have those it's fucking wet signs? What kind of hotel are you, huh?"

"Uh, we usually do. I think —"

"You think? You work here. You should know!" Chuuya's starting to feel a little bad; he has always made sure to be friendly to service and retail workers, so doing the complete opposite isn't as much fun as it might seem at first. He only stifles the urge to cringe and apologize by telling himself that this is for a bigger cause. And by stealing a glance at his phone.

The call on his screen says 3:49.

It's barely been three minutes, which means Chuuya has to keep up the distraction for at least, five more.

"I — I should get my chef because it's my first —" The security guard starts rising to his feet but nope. Wrong move. Not what he's supposed to be doing right now. "— day here —"

"And it will be your last if you leave a dying woman on the floor."

"Dying?" The man stares back down at Yosano.

Yosano clutches the side of her head. "Yeah, dying. I fell and am now experiencing partial blindness. What if I injured my head, dummy?"

Chuuya tries to nudge her leg subtly. If she was dying, she wouldn't be so loud right now.

Yosano's glare turns into a pained expression once again, and she lets out a low groan, waving her hand at the security guard. "Help me up! And be decent enough to help me down the stairs. Safely this time."

The man looks back at the hallway where they came from — where Dazai and Ranpo are working right now — and then back at Yosano, clearly reconsidering his priorities. Finally, with a muffled curse under his breath, he kneels down and starts helping Yosano back up as she does not go easy on him. Chuuya's following them when his phone buzzes.

Pausing to create some distance between him and the two, Chuuya holds it to his ear. "Yeah?"

"Another security guard is coming from the west wing," Dazai's voice tells him, still calm despite the content of his words, "would you be so kind as to put those excellent acting skills of yours to use once again?"

"Fuck," Chuuya mutters, already spinning around, "yeah, I'm coming."

"Be careful."

"You too."

Chuuya doesn't have enough time to worry about Yosano and the other security guard right now. Besides, it's not like she isn't creative. She'll come up with an excuse why her beloved, angry boyfriend suddenly disappeared without a word.

Chuuya's is in the west wing as well, so if he just arrives in front of the security office before the other guard with an excuse and distraction in handy, then everything will be fine, Dazai and Ranpo will have enough time to finish their task, and they can all escape unnoticed.

Chuuya rounds the corner, coming up in the long hallway and —

Problem: the security guard was faster.

Obviously. Chuuya's fucking slow now with his damn leg, but fuck —

"Oi!" he yells, trying to catch up. There's no plan in his head, only the knowledge that if the security guard finds Dazai and Ranpo doing extremely shady stuff to the hotel's security footage, everything Dazai has worked for will fall apart.

He can't let that happen.

"Hey, you! I'm talking to you! Hello?!"

It's like trying to get a brick wall to reply. The guy is neither slowing down nor looking back, and Chuuya's too far away to physically stop him, so he does the first thing that comes to his mind: grabbing the bottle of hand sanitizer he carries around in his pocket and flinging it at the man.

It works.

"Oh shit," Chuuya murmurs, taking a few steps back. So this is what his dads mean when they say he should stop to think before doing anything. Some critical thinking could have avoided staring back at a man thrice the size of him with a face that screams *murder*.

Run.

Chuuya does as best as he can. Judging by the steps following him, so does the man, not held back by a bad fucking ankle.

"— I said stop right now!"

Chuuya swerves around the corner, starting to regret every single one of his life choices.

Oh god. Oh fuck.

All those times, Dazai joked around that Chuuya would get arrested, and now it's going to actually happen. Not only that, but at the worst possible timing too.

The plan. Tsushima. Everything.

The voice grows louder, and Chuuya's pace only slower, and —

"Here you are," someone else says all of a sudden.

"Dazai?! Wha—" His voice quite literally gets cut off as Dazai swoops him up in his arms in one motion and starts sprinting. "What the fuck! I thought you were — you were supposed to leave once you're done?"

"Change of heart," Dazai's breathy voice says, and Chuuya loops his arms around his neck. Not because he *wants* to. It's just for stability. Chuuya might not like being carried around like a fucking damsel in distress, but he recognizes when to accept the help that is offered and when not to. This is one of those times.

"Ranpo?"

They reach the stairwell, and the rhythm of Dazai's steps turns into stuttering, rocking motions shaking Chuuya up and down in his arms as he hangs on for dear life. He does not want to die here. Not yet. Not like this.

"Already out."

"Yosano?"

"Downstairs."

Dazai came back for him. That must have been the reason for the change of plans, right? Dazai came back.

"Thank you," Chuuya murmurs, half-hoping that it's quiet enough that Dazai won't hear it. The arms around him squeeze him in a wordless reply, though. Chuuya's face feels warm.

Dazai only slows down when they slip back out of the service entrance, coming out in a side alley. Chest heaving, he shoots Chuuya a look. "Man, you're heavy."

Chuuya's brows tug into a scowl. "Well, no one asked you to come back! Now let me down."

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

"Whatever you say." Dazai lets him slip out of his grip and onto his feet. "Just make sure you don't sprain your ankle."

"Yeah, I know. Think he's still after us?"

"I'm pretty sure we lost him."

Chuuya lets out a huge breath, relief flooding his lungs like heroine. "That was..." He never finishes his sentence, not with the laughter that bubbles from his chest, and only gets stronger when Dazai's mouth breaks into breathless laughter as well.

For a few simple moments, they forget about the towering pile of baggage between them. For a few moments, they can just be.

Chapter 28: Step Four

Chapter Notes

warnings: explicit sexual content, coming out scene, emotional and physical abuse, bigotry

Sometimes being looks like this.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck — I'm gonna — I —" Dazai's rhythm is merciless, leaving Chuuya no space to think, to breathe, to do anything but feel his cock grind against his prostate over and over again. "I'm so —"

Above him, Dazai lips hover inches from his face, his breath hot against his cheek, so close that all Chuuya would have to do to kiss him is tip his head forward. But that's not how they work anymore. As Dazai looks at him, his hips slow down just the tiniest bit, and the warm pull in Chuuya's stomach flutters out of reach.

"Don't — ah, fucking stop," Chuuya hisses, driving his fingers into Dazai's hair to yank him closer. "You hear me?"

Whatever strange headspace Dazai was in just now, he snaps out of it, burying his face in the heat of Chuuya's neck, pressing his lips over the skin there as he resumes his pace. Quick, ruthless, brutal, and so, so good —

Chuuya's head tosses back on the backseat of the car, mouth parting around an endless moan.

It's Dazai's cock fucking him like he's trying to carve out a space inside him, and it's Dazai's teeth piercing his skin, sucking, apologizing with his tongue, and it's Dazai's fingers wrapping around Chuuya's throbbing length, matching his strokes with the tempo of his hips, and it's Dazai, always Dazai, and —

"Want to kiss you so bad," Dazai breathes against his skin. "Want to feel you moan on my tongue."

Fuck.

"No. You — can't. "

"I know."

It always goes like this.

And Chuuya wants — of course, he wants to. Fuck, he doesn't even remember their last proper kiss because back then, he didn't know it would be their last, but —

If he kisses Dazai again, he won't stop and —

"Please," Chuuya whispers, "please just make me —"

Dazai always knows.

When the first wave of his orgasm rolls over him, Chuuya thinks he might lose his voice, except he isn't even making any sounds. He's just gasping for air that won't come as his muscles clench so tightly he absently worries about getting a full-body cramp and dying. (Death by cock would be one hell of a way to go, but right now, Chuuya would prefer to stay among the living for a while longer.)

Dazai never stops fucking him, not even for a second. Instead, when Chuuya blindly shoves Dazai's hand away from his dick, starting to feel the mild pain of too much, Dazai rolls him over on his good leg.

The change in position makes Chuuya let out a series of wet gasps from the overstimulation on his prostate so soon after his first orgasm. Underneath the hissing discomfort always hides more pleasure, though, and fuck, Chuuya's cock twitches with new interest, half-hard already, just as Dazai's pace dissolves into stuttering jerks of his hips before he stills completely.

Dazai feels heavy on top of him, his breaths sounding exhausted after what he described as a very unpleasant "date" with Nobuko, but it doesn't stop him from sliding down his body and replacing his cock with three fingers. Somewhere in the back of his mind, gratitude flashes through Chuuya. He's thankful for all the months they spent finding each and every spot that would make the other feel dizzy with pleasure. Thankful that Dazai made it his personal mission to discover every one of Chuuya's tells, and has not forgotten a single one since then. Thankful that Dazai knows how quickly Chuuya's overstimulation turns into the insatiable craving for more, especially when he's stressed, and how uncomfortable it feels when he doesn't get it. Because not a lot of people know. Because not a lot of people cared enough to find out.

Until Dazai.

(And look, where that got them.)

His second orgasm is fast and merciless, rushing through his veins like lightning, as Dazai grinds his fingers against his prostate and gently pushes the palm of his hand against Chuuya's lower stomach, making him feel every inch.

When the pleasure finally recedes, Chuuya's muscles turn into jelly, and he drops his head on the car seat, trying to form a single coherent thought in the haze of the afterglow. The car because after Hayashi quite literally caught Dazai slipping out of his room that one time, they decided not to repeat that mistake. They never do it at Dazai's place. Chuuya hasn't been there since that one night, and he doesn't plan to ever step foot inside again. There are too many memories attached to it. Too many late-night conversations, and cooking sessions, and shared cigarettes on the balcony. Everything they can't go back to anymore.

It leaves them with bathroom stalls, the chairs in Dazai's bar — or the bar counter itself — and his car. These aren't rules or anything like that. Because this is nothing except a pitiful attempt at clinging to the last part of their relationship that isn't complicated. For as long as they still can.

(Eight days.)

(Eight more days.)

They dress in silence, even if a million different thoughts are running through Chuuya's mind.

Step four.

Dazai's about to do something incredibly brave and incredibly stupid.

"So, uh," Chuuya looks for the right words and comes up empty, "when's the interview?"

In time for the opening of his bar, Dazai's doing an interview that will be broadcasted on national television, both thanks to Ranpo and all the promo his friends have been doing for him on social media.

"On Wednesday."

Two days.

Clean and dressed, Chuuya fixes the mess on his head as he finally looks at Dazai taking his time rolling up the sleeves of his shirt, white bandages coming to light — even if a bit ruffled.

"Step four tomorrow, huh?"

Dazai turns to him. An oddly peaceful expression graces his lips. "I'm not even scared. I'm just... relieved?"

"Yeah, I get that. You spend so much time, you know, hiding yourself that at some point it gets more exhausting than scary." Chuuya shrugs. "It makes sense."

First, to actually get to live in that relief, he has to make it out somehow, though.

Chuuya hates that this possibility even exists. They're in the twenty-first century. Their life isn't a fucking criminal drama. But for people like them, that possibility always exists. And Tsushima Gen'emon is at a low point in his life. His wife is leaving him. His family is turning away from him. And now, his son will crush even the last bit of "expectation" he had for him. Of course, Dazai would feel relief, but that doesn't mean that everything's going to happen smoothly, let alone pretty.

"I guess so," Dazai says, turning to gaze at him. "Thank you, Chuuya. For helping me with this even after what I did."

"Of course I'd help. It doesn't have anything to do with you and me."

It does, though, and they both know that. If it wasn't for Tsushima — let's just say a lot of things would be different now. In another, better world, they wouldn't have to meet in secret, wouldn't have to skirt around the subject of a relationship every damn time because perhaps they would have actually made it.

Dazai says nothing for a few minutes, letting the silence linger, before nodding. "Well, I can drive you to your lunch with Kouyou."

"The ballet school," Chuuya agrees, "thanks."

The academy is barely even five minutes away, and Chuuya spends that time gazing out of the window because nothing on his tongue feels right, not with what's about to happen in the next few days.

When Dazai stops the car, it feels like one of those moments. The

moments where people either confess their love, or say their goodbyes, or utter something meaningful. "Just —" Eyes pressing shut, then opening again, Chuuya shoots him a look. "— be careful, okay? Don't let him do more damage than necessary. In and out. Quickly. And if he starts being violent — for the love of god, please call someone. Anyone. Yosano. Me. Ranpo. Because you're not doing this alone anymore, okay? We —"

"Chuuya?" Dazai cuts in. "Breathe."

Blinking, Chuuya does, and some of the weight seeps out of him. He still hates this plan, has tried to talk Dazai out of it the moment he said the words *I'm going to tell my father the entire truth before anyone else can and use his reaction against him*. Chuuya fucking begged him to just work with Fyodor instead, use whatever dirt he has on his father, but Dazai pointed out that he doesn't only want Tsushima to go down, he also wants to come out on top of it. Tsushima getting involved in a scandal days before the bar opens wouldn't be good. However, a family "scandal" that tells the right narrative? Well, that could work wonders in the age of social media. There is still a plan B in case something goes wrong. Fyodor. His father's enemies. The information Ranpo and Yosano gathered. Dazai is a great schemer, after all. In the end, though, there was not much Chuuya could do to change Dazai's mind. Not really. So instead of letting him do it all by himself, Chuuya decided to help him.

And here, they are.

Chuuya's breathing, and so is Dazai as they look at each other.

"Just be careful. That's all I wanted to say."

"Okay," Dazai replies and offers him a smile, small but honest. "I'll get the footage and get out. Easy."

"Good, because I still need to kick your ass," Chuuya jokes weakly.

Dazai's lips twitch.

And that's that.

When Chuuya enters the empty dancing room, a strange feeling overcomes him. Not overwhelming longing, or crushing regret, or piercing pain in his heart because he knows he'll never quite see these high ceilings and light-flooded rooms from a dancer's perspective

again.

No, the feeling is soft. Bittersweet.

Chuuya made some mistakes he isn't proud of. He pushed too hard. He never took any breaks because he thought stopping for a minute meant giving up. He ignored his pain. But he's human. Humans are flawed creatures, right?

Just look at Dazai.

Dazai is — he sliced their relationship apart because he thought it was the only way, and yeah, it hurts. It will always hurt to think back and wonder *what if...?* What if they had somehow made it? What if Dazai had come to the airport? What if Chuuya had said *I love you* earlier? But Dazai's still about the do the most important thing in his life, and Chuuya — he feels a little proud.

They're human, not some flawless superheroes who never bleed. It doesn't mean that one mistake has to stop them from doing their best with everything else.

So, yeah, it sucks that Chuuya might never really dance again, but there's room for more. For new things.

Kouyou comes out of the changing room in leggings and a tight shirt and immediately fixes him with that *I know what you did thirty minutes ago* glare.

Chuuya sighs as he matches her pace out of the room.

(Goodbye, Kouyou's ballet school. It's been... interesting.)

"Let me guess," he says, "Yosano told you."

"That you have been sleeping with the same man who broke your heart not too long ago? Yeah, bet my girlfriend told me that."

"And let me guess: you think I'm an idiot." But Kouyou doesn't say anything, which makes Chuuya frown, turning to shoot her a puzzled look. "I'm not right? You don't think I'm an idiot?"

"Don't get me wrong. If I had the chance to scratch out his eyes with my fingernails, I would. Without a doubt, but —" Kouyou pushes open the door, and the bird-chirping, warm air of a summer afternoon greets them. Chuuya inhales, just in case he ever starts forgetting what

all of this felt and sounded and smelled like. "I think you're an idiot for writing this off as another round of casual hookups instead of using the damn time to work out your issues. Clearly, you two love each other in a very complicated, all-or-nothing, destructive kind of way."

Chuuya grimaces. *Are they toxic?* They kind of are. "So, what are you saying?"

"That you shouldn't make the same mistake twice." To hear that from Kouyou, of all people, it must mean something.

"It's not as easy as simply working out our issues."

Eight days are not nearly enough for that.

"Why not?"

Chuuya shoves his hands into the pockets of his pants and lifts his head to watch the trees bloom and thrive above him, lush colors of green and pink melting together. "I can't do long distance. I really can't."

Aside from the fact that he'd probably go out of his mind not being able to see and touch his partner for so long, being so many miles apart would create a plethora of doubts and insecurities inside him.

"And even though I feel like I could forgive him — fuck, maybe I already did — I can't imagine ever trusting him blindly again." Chuuya doesn't want to be the clingy boyfriend that keeps Dazai on a fucking leash. Chuuya doesn't want to fall asleep every night wondering whether Dazai's in someone else's bedroom right now because all of it was another lie. Another game. Chuuya doesn't want to overthink everything he says in fear that Dazai will use it for some twisted scheme of his. He wants fun, and adventures, and a love that makes you want to shout to the skies.

He wants to feel alive.

He wants to feel like he's dancing.

Kouyou rubs her forehead. "Oh boy, Dazai really screwed that up, huh?"

Chuuya huffs out a dry laugh. In hindsight, every little thing that happened feels much less significant. Time does that. Even though he

can still vividly hear the automatic airport intercom say, *"this is the final boarding call for passengers of flight 372A."* The weight of his phone is still etched into every muscle of his body. Sometimes, it's all he dreams about. Being left alone. Waiting for someone who will never come. "Yeah, you could say that."

"Then," Kouyou says, "stop pouring salt into the wound. Let the man go. You both deserve better than that."

Chuuya doesn't know about *deserving*, but he likes to think that even the messiest of people can find something peaceful in the end.

They go to the nearby restaurant where they've been spending most of Kouyou's lunch breaks over the year — sometimes with Yosano, once upon a time with Dazai. Kouyou was less upset about his early flight home and more furious about the way he has been treating, or not treating, his ankle. ("Your legs are your weapons, lad. Would you try to use a gun that's hanging by a thread?") So she spends most of their lunch lecturing him on everything he will have to change in the future. Even if he'll never dance again, it doesn't mean that he's out of all his options. Life is full of those, after all. It's not enough time for Chuuya to say everything that he wants to, but it's nice to be able to have a final lunch with a friend, and when Kouyou pulls him into a bear hug at the end of it, Chuuya feels light in his chest.

It sucks to leave so early, but it's also been good, right? It's been really, really good, too.

Besides, he'll still get to see her before going back home. A few very turbulent days are ahead of them.

Step four:

If you asked Dazai whether he ever imagined coming out to his father, there were only ever three probable scenarios that popped into his mind.

One in which his father finds out after Dazai dies. Maybe he'll go through his phone, commit one last act of crossing lines, or perhaps he'll accidentally overhear one of his friends speaking about that one time Dazai did this and that with someone that is not Yosano and definitely not a girl either. It would make the man spit on his literal grave, raging against someone that isn't even there anymore. The image always leaves a quiet peacefulness in Dazai — perhaps too quiet, even. Because in the end, he would never get to see the

reaction. That expression of disbelief. The contempt. Another thing his son failed to be: straight.

The second scenario feels less plausible because if there is one thing that Dazai feels positively confident to say about himself is that he's meticulously careful. Even when he tried to rebel against his father's expectations of him, even when he pulled and tugged at the shackles around his feet, he always made sure to leave a back door open so that if he had to — and he always did — he could erase his "shameful" secret into oblivion. He had a fake relationship. A reputation as a shameless flirt. He either kept it in his inner circle, knowing that what happened between his friends and him would stay there as well, or he kept it outside of Yokohama, far away from his father's eyes.

Until he met Chuuya.

(Apparently, people don't lie when they say love makes you blind. Every rule and safety precaution was tossed out of the window and down into the abyss the moment Dazai walked into the kitchen at two in the morning and saw a tiny redhead wearing pajama pants and glaring at the fridge, then glaring at Dazai.)

The third scenario is new — newer than the others because Dazai came up with it the day Dostoevsky told him that Nobuko knew. That one leaves him startling awake on some nights, gasping for air as he feels his father's cold and heavy fingers around his throat. It's by far his least favorite scenario. The other two, at least, happen because of unfortunate accidents. This one, though... getting intentionally outed by someone as irrelevant and random as Nobuko Sasaki. And for what? A few minutes of fame? Social status? It's absurd. So there have only ever been three scenarios. Never in the twenty-two years of his life has Dazai believed that he would walk up to his father's office and tell the man himself.

He never felt like had to. Why in the world would he ever come out to a bigot? There was no logic to it. There still isn't. The only thing changed are his circumstances. Dazai has been backed into a corner, and the only way out is... this.

The elevator doors slide open, and each step on the dark-ruby carpet echoes the beat inside his chest.

Dazai has never had any good associations with *the Setting Sun*. Once upon a time, when they were only a family of three, his mother used to say that Gen'emon loved his hotel more than them. After her death,

school often sent Dazai home for inappropriate behavior, and when not even the nannies couldn't jump in, he ended up here, staring out of the windows and over the city, wondering if his mother was hiding somewhere, playing a longer, more complicated version of hide and seek. The years came and went, the hotels grew, and so did his father's expectations, as well as his disappointment when Dazai turned out to be anything but the mirror image of a perfect businessman's son. The hotel was just another cage, another trap that would bind him to a man who would rather cut off his own fingers than touch Dazai with something other than revulsion.

Sometimes Dazai wonders how someone that hates him so much can have so many expectations of him, but in the end, Gen'emons intentions were always to reshape his son into someone he wanted him to be. Never accept that Dazai was just... Dazai.

His son.

A human.

Nothing less, and nothing more than that.

In front of the door, the big bad door, Dazai stops only for a moment to straighten his spine, not letting himself linger longer than necessary before his feet decide to take him elsewhere. Too late to turn back now, right?

He knocks. He doesn't wait for his father's answer. The office, when he enters, reeks of expensive scotch and sweat. Funny. For the first time in his life, Dazai looks at his father and doesn't see the towering giant whose voice cuts like ice and whose fists weigh a ton. He seems strangely, pathetically human. His hair is greasy, his shirt wrinkled. His eyes are red-rimmed when he looks up at Dazai.

Tsushima Gen'emon looks precisely like a man that is about to be left by his wife and who's having the jitters about a botched and illegal deal coming back to haunt him from the past. Nothing public yet. Just a phone call from Nobuko's mother, one of the company's lawyers, probably telling him that the Public Security Intelligence Agency is demanding access to files that have been kept under lock and key for a while now. With reason, too.

And Dazai is about to deliver his final gift like the good son that he is.

"What'd you need?"

Drunk. He sounds drunk.

Wonderful. Dazai won't even have to push that hard.

"Hello, father," he says, coming to a stop in front of his desk, "I'm stopping by to tell you that you smell and that I don't think you should attend the opening party of Lupin. Trust me, you will not like it there. Also: I'm bisexual." The more the man's eyes narrow, the wider does Dazai's grin get, cutting through his skin. "I've been fucking guys ever since you took us on holidays to Dubai."

His father stares at him. Then he lets out a rough snort. "Stop playing around, Dazai."

"Oh, father, I told a lot of jokes over the course of my life, but this isn't one of them."

"You're not — that —" His lips curl in disgust. "Stop wasting my time and get out of my fucking office."

As much as he wishes to, Dazai can't. No. There is no way around it anymore. To gain everything, he only has to lose part of his dignity. It’s nothing. Doable.

"You really don't believe me, huh?" Dazai fishes out his wallet out of the back pocket of his pants. His fingers don't shake when he flips it open and digs out the two framed pictures taken in a photo booth in Paris. It seems like a lifetime ago now. But Chuuya once said that they would be a printed memory. They are. They're also so much more now. Dazai tosses them on his father's desk, letting him take a good and thorough look. And finally, Dazai places both of his hands there as well, leaning forward so that he's just within reach. "Still Think I'm lying?"

His father's eyes flicker to the pictures. Up at Dazai. Then down again.

Dazai not only anticipates it, but he needs that reaction. Yet, he still flinches when his father's hand shoots out lightning-quickly and slams his face into the solid wood of the desk.

Something cracks.

Ouch.

"You really believe that you have any ground whatsoever to act so high and mighty all of a sudden?" he hears his father's voice hiss

through the numbing throb of his skull, still pinned to the desk. "You think you have it all figured out? That you can pull this shit because I have a rough fucking week?"

"I'm not —" Dazai squeezes his eyes shut when using his mouth lets wave after wave of gutting pain roll over his facial muscles. "— pulling — anything. I just wanted to tell the truth — for once."

The pressure on his head increases, and then he's seeing blurry stars again.

"Truth," the man spits, "what about you even is true?! Everything you ever did was a worthless cry for attention. You want my attention so bad that you'd stick up that pervert's dick up your throat? You're that desperate?"

Dazai's whole world spins when he forces himself to lift his chin and look into his father's eyes. "Yes," he grits out, "and I love every fucking minute of i—"

Crack.

He stumbles back from the blow to his jaw, hand coming up to touch the blood that starts gushing out of his nose.

Good.

Dazai has felt his father's fist a decent amount of times in his life. Most of the time, he drank so much afterwards that he barely remembered what they felt like. The few times he didn't, he sometimes even embraced the pain. He thought that he deserved it for being such a useless human being.

This is different. Every attack is more footage. More evidence.

Step four was never supposed to be the pretty cherry on the cake. It's the raw piece of meat after months of starvation.

"What's the —" Fuck, speaking *hurts*. "— problem, father?" Dazai doesn't want to know what the grin on his face looks like, mainly because it's not a smile at all. Merely a puckering of ugly wrinkles. "Given how much —" He coughs into his hand. "— suck up to the public I'd — think you liked being on your knees?"

"You —" Whatever thin thread of restraint the man was holding onto visibly snaps, and he lurches towards Dazai with an ugly sneer on his

face before pinning him against the wall.

"I'm nothing like you!" Dazai's face sways as his father's knuckles connect with his cheek. "I built an entire empire from scratch when I was your age!" The next blow is sloppy, but Dazai's lungs burn anyway. "Not a useless failure that whores himself out with a fucking —-" Another one. "Do you think your bar will become anything without me? Without my money?" And another one. "You think anyone will want to buy drinks from a disgusting piece of shit like you?!"

Every inch of his body is screaming. Dazai could drag it out for another few minutes. He could collect even more evidence. But it's enough. For once in his life, Dazai doesn't want to see the light on the other side. Not like this. Not by the hands of this man.

He has taken enough.

"What do you think it feels like when everyone can talk about how great their kids are, and I have a bandaged freak back home that's fucking another boy?! You think that feels good? That I can feel proud of someone like that?"

His father reaches back with his fist, and with one last flash of strength that hasn't bled out of his body yet, Dazai uses the little moment in-between to push forward, gritting his teeth as his muscles burn with agony, and make the man topple over.

The big bad man that has been staring down at Dazai his whole life is now staring up at him.

"You're the one who's disgusting," Dazai hisses and digs out every remark, every grip around his neck, every cold glare, and every single damn punch from the last twenty-two years as he lunges and lets his fist meet his father's face at full tilt. "And you're the one who told me to cover up."

When he sees the flicker of fear inside the eyes gazing back at him, Dazai's overcome with the sudden, raw desire to show his father exactly what he's been doing to him all those years. To make *him* feel powerless and small for a change. To beat that face into such a bloody, unrecognizable pulp that he can sculpt it into something new, something that's not his father anymore. Dazai's heart drums for blood, for revenge, and for the opportunity to shed himself of this man and his grip on Dazai once and for all.

His fist is in the air.

Dazai's pretty sure he's grinning manically.

The man under him looks like he's about to shit his pants. In fact, he might have already done so.

Dazai wants to kill him so fucking badly that his chest is aching with it, screaming at him to *go, go, go* and feel that cathartic release of violence pumping through his blood but —

I still need to kick your ass.

He could give in; he could kill his father right here and now, but where would that get him? Where would that get the people who helped him?

Dazai's arm slowly falls, and with it, the blazing ire leaks out of his body in one go, head dropping as his chest heaves for every sore inhale of breath.

"You're insane," he hears his father spit out. "I should have locked you up the moment you drove your mother to her death."

Somehow, Dazai manages to laugh, the sound low and raspy. "Your wife killed herself — because she was depressed and married to a piece of shit that couldn't even utter the word without popping a vein." *May she finally rest in peace.* "You. It was all — you."

And that's the last thing he says before rising to his feet, barely being able to carry his own weight.

The man on the ground continues yapping and barking, hissing that he'll take back all the money he put into the bar and that he'll ruin him and this and that like a sad, little dog that refuses to admit it lost the fight. Right. Dazai remembers something about *dedication*. He cannot wait to see that shatter as well.

Dazai only makes sure to steal back the pictures, *his* pictures, before stumbling out of the office, and finally, after years of feeling caged, stepping out of it.

Only then does he allow his body to start to tremble quietly.

Chuuya was supposed to be looking into enrolling into university, but instead, he's been pacing back and forth the entire time, his pulse too

distracting to focus on anything other than one thought: Dazai.

It's been planned. There will be evidence. And once that's done — Dazai will have enough leverage to rip free from his father once and for all but — but Chuuya, with the force of a thousand burning suns, hates that it has to happen like this. And he's scared, too.

Gen'emon Tsushima might seem like a collected, business genius to the outside world, but Chuuya has seen him rave about little things that don't matter. He has seen how he treats his children when they don't conform to his idea of them. It didn't look pretty.

He just hopes that Dazai leaves before anything physical happens. Even words are more than enough to do some serious damage, but anything beyond that —

His phone finally buzzes. Chuuya doesn't even bother to look at the name.

"Hey." It's Yosano's voice on the other end. "He's… dealing with it."

"Police?"

"We just got back from the station. They listened. They had to with the state he was in."

Chuuya's blood runs cold, waves of concern and anger clashing together to create a perfect storm inside his lungs. "Can I see him?"

"Honestly, he said he wants to be alone for a while," her low voice tells him, "but if there's anyone he'll want to see, it will be you."

"Okay." Chuuya lets out a staggered breath. "I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

"Yes. And Chuuya?"

"Yeah?"

"It's... a heavy sight. Just so you don't walk in blind."

The next half-hour is a blur.

Chuuya doesn't bother slipping into different clothes; he grabs his phone and asks the family driver to give him a lift, his foot bouncing the entire time, everything in him buzzing and thrumming.

Finally there, Chuuya knocks, and not even a minute later, Yosano opens the door, wearing a mask of concealed murderous rage. "Hi." She gestures towards the hallway leading to Dazai's bedroom. Chuuya wordlessly passes her.

In front of the door, he knocks again, holding his breath. "It's me." Part of him expects Dazai to send him away, so when the door swings open and reveals Dazai and everything that comes with him, it takes Chuuya some time to force air back into his lungs. Once he does, Chuuya slips inside, closing the door, and taking another, braver look.

A bruise blossoming under his left eye. Another bruise on his cheek. His nose looks swollen, like it's been bleeding for too long. He must have not changed his clothes yet because there are stains of blood on the collar. On the chest. Tiny spots everywhere.

It's...

The plan was a *scandal*.

Breaking news: famous chairman Tsushima Gen'emon is revealed to be a raging bigot as he verbally abuses his son after he comes out.

Not a fucking attempt at murder. Not so much violence that Dazai can barely see. Not... not *this*.

"I didn't let you in to look at me like that," Dazai says with a bite in his tone and turns away, sitting down on the edge of the bed. "I knew what I was getting myself into."

Chuuya sighs, sits down next to him, close enough so their shoulders bump into each other. "That doesn't make it any better," he replies as his hands curl into fists.

"It is what it is. Now we have what we need."

For a few moments, it's utterly silent in the room, save for their breathing. So quiet, Chuuya senses the exact moment the first tremors start running through Dazai's body. They don't stop.

"I don't know —" Dazai murmurs and cuts himself off, his breaths becoming shallow. "I knew — I knew and still —"

"Hey." Scooting closer, Chuuya cups his face. He forces Dazai's unfocused eyes up, holds him so close and tight that it feels like Chuuya can tuck himself into his central system and help him breathe

again. "I've got you. It's okay."

"It's —" Dazai's lungs wheeze. "— over."

"It's over," Chuuya murmurs, not letting go.

"I'm completely... alone."

Chuuya takes a heavy breath himself and shakes his head. "You're not. You have so many friends who love you. So many people who love you."

But Dazai burns like ice under him. "I have no more family left."

Chuuya thinks he understands. Dazai's father was anything but good, but to Dazai… he was the only familial link left. It's scary being utterly alone in this world. Being an orphan. It's terrifying.

Family is about more than blood, though. Dazai might not see right now, but he has a family, one that loves and accepts him for the person that he is.

"You're not alone," Chuuya whispers into the space between them, his forehead pressing against Dazai's cold skin. "I swear to you, you're not. You are not alone."

It's terrifying, too, to keep someone from trembling apart just with a pair of warm arms, even more, frightening when this thing between them is anything but clear and easy. At this moment, though? Every night they had — every obstacle that ever stood in their way — even all

the lies Dazai told — to protect Chuuya, to keep this from happening to him —

All of it seems irrelevant. So fucking unimportant in the grand scheme of things.

Chuuya's aware that holding Dazai in his arms, who's on the brink of a panic attack, is skewing his perspective, and that it won't erase the broken trust between them — because it did break, and denying it would be like trying to fix a shattered mirror with glue — but fuck, it's so easy to slip back into a version of himself that loved Dazai without any buts. So easy to let Dazai fall apart a little as Chuuya never, not once, lets go of him, trying to give him back the air into his lungs with each new shared breath.

It's a slow process. Minutes pass before Dazai's shallow breathing stabilizes, and when it does, Chuuya wordlessly pulls him into his chest. He read somewhere that physical touch can be grounding in situations like these. Considering that Dazai doesn't utter any protests nor move to pull away, there must be something to it.

"Hey," Chuuya finds himself murmuring at some point, tipping his head sideways to get a look at Dazai, "do you want to lie down?"

Dazai starts pulling away. "You don't have to —"

"It's fine. Lie down, Osamu. Here." Patting a spot on the bed, Chuuya stares him down until

Dazai obeys and spreads out on the bed, his movements weak and tired. Then Chuuya lies down behind him and mirrors the position from earlier, sliding his arms under Dazai's until he's pressed firmly to his back. Like a jetpack. Dazai doesn't say anything else, but the way he grabs Chuuya's hand and squeezes it like a lifeline is louder than any word could ever be.

The faint tremors stop when Dazai's breaths even out into a regular, quiet rhythm, Dazai proabably dozing off from exhaustion. Chuuya finds himself blinking blearily once or twice as well, but even if he never slips into actual sleep, he's content just lying here as well. It's warm. Safe. A bubble of time and space where everything else doesn't get to exist. It feels unfairly easy for such a pair of complicated people.

Chuuya feels the moment Dazai wakes up because he jerks out of it, calming down as soon as he must notice his surroundings, but Chuuya tightens his arms around him anyway. "You're okay," he whispers, pressing his forehead to his back.

"Chuuya's still here."

It makes him roll his eyes even though Dazai can’t see it. "You know, I wouldn't just get up and leave you here."

"You used to that."

Chuuya huffs, but his half-hearted irritation melts into a yawn. "'cause I had a job that involved getting up at six in the morning every day."

"Technically, you still have that job."

"Technically," Chuuya mutters, a sad frown forming on his face, "I'm leaving soon and therefore out of a job. And technically, it's eight o'clock. I don't have anywhere to be right now." Other than here. With him.

Dazai seems to accept that, at least.

When Dazai speaks next, his voice is barely audible. "You want to hear something funny? Now that I have the... evidence," the word tastes bitter, "I don't even want to go public with it anymore."

Chuuya lets the words sink in before opening his mouth to reply, genuinely trying to see where Dazai is coming from. His way of thinking isn't always easy to follow, but Chuuya doesn't have to wonder for long. Of course, it makes sense.

"Sharing the most vulnerable moment of your life with the entire country isn't exactly a walk in the park. I get it." Chuuya wouldn't want to do it either.

"I don't even care about the bar anymore," Dazai continues. "Sure, it's something I worked for. I guess I'm proud of it. But I could live without it if my father decided to sabotage it. I could get a side job like every other person and finish my degree. I could just move into a smaller apartment. I don't even need all this space."

Chuuya snorts softly. "You could."

"But I'm not going to."

Chuuya's lips press together as he nods.

"I gave up too much to cower away now."Step five. "What's a little more, huh?"

"You don't have to, you know," Chuuya reminds him. "You have options."

Dazai's chest falls with a tired sigh. "I know, but I think I owe it to some people out there."

With a muffled hum, Chuuya allows his forehead to rest against Dazai's back for a while longer. "Whatever decision you end up making, I'll support you."

Because as soon as it all ends, Chuuya is going home, and he doesn't

want to do that bringing regret-shaped baggage with him. Not this time.

Chapter 29: Team French Kiss

Chapter Notes

warnings: explicit sexual content, mentions of abuse

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tugging at the collar of his shirt, Dazai looks at his image in the mirror. The only thing that one and a half days have done to his injuries is make them appear even worse. Half of his face is swollen shut and purple. It's everything he needed and more, yet standing in the office of Lupin — his bar that's opening in exactly three days — he feels like he's about to walk to his execution.

Oh well, it's not like death hasn't been the very thing he has been dreaming about since his childhood.

On the desk, his phone buzzes for the fifth time within the span of two minutes. Dazai doesn't need to look at the screen to know that it's Nobuko texting him threats, ones she has been sending him ever since he didn't appear to lunch with her "friends." They're getting more and more creative each day, and Dazai vaguely wants Nobuko to make her threats reality and run to his father. Perhaps he can pay one of the security guards to film her reaction after she walks out of his office — if his father is still going to sit there, that is.

Last night, his father was arrested for assault and battery. A few hours later, his team of lawyers got him out again. Under what conditions and circumstances, Dazai doesn't know, and in all honesty, neither does he care. Because jail was never supposed to be the end goal of this scheme.

Social ruin. That's what he's aiming for.

Not only for the dramatic irony of publicly obliterating the very man who has been meticulously concerned about his status in the world his entire life but also because in the eye of the public, his father won't be able to do a single thing to fight back. If that man lifts so much as a finger to harm Dazai or Chuuya or anyone from his circle — the world will know who is behind it. The national attention will be a shield stronger than any wall or bullet-proof vest.

How funny, really. To hide for so long, only to end up like this.

The phone continues buzzing, but Dazai leaves it lying on the desk as he slips out of his office and walks through his bar, finished but still empty for two more days until he spots the reporter Ranpo personally hand-picked for this interview.

Fujimoto Masashi. Twenty-five years old. Still, a rookie compared to his colleagues, but his presence here speaks for itself.

His head tilts ever so slightly as he takes in Dazai's face, the bruises, and the swelling. If he's shocked, he masks it well, the curious and friendly smile not wavering for even one second when he shakes the hand that Dazai offers him. "Dazai Osamu. Thank you for coming, Masashi-san."

"Thank you for having me."

Dazai sits down on the leather couch across from him and folds one leg over the other, feeling like he's floating in the eye of the storm. "Shall we start?"

"Of course." Fujimoto glances from his notes to Dazai before speaking. "I have prepared a couple of questions, but first, I'm going to ask: what happened to your face?" Dazai doesn't reply, not yet. "You know, Mr. Dazai, when I did my research on you, I discovered various stories about your tumultuous teenage years. A few people call you a party animal. Others, however, claim that it is only scratching the surface of your eccentric personality. You clearly have an image. I'm very interested to hear which one you're going for with Lupin."

If someone ever asked Dazai how he'd want to finish business with his father, he would have never chosen *this*. Relying on others. Unveiling the bandages. Making something so personal into a public affair. But it is what this entire situation has boiled down to, and either he lets it trample over him, or… he profits.

A piece of his identity for everything he ever wanted.

(Aside from one thing. One person.)

"The answer I'm going to give you, Fujimoto-san, will not be what you came here for, but I still urge you to write down every word of it. It will make headlines. I can promise you that."

The news reporter only lifts his eyes to nod at him.

Good.

"This here," Dazai points at his face. The ugly bruises blossoming under his left eye, making it swell shut. The shadows on the other side of his jaw. His nose, a little crooked. The entire naked truth in all its glory. "This was done by Tsushima Gen'emon. My father.

"The truth is that —" He takes a breath. Another one. And another one. "— that man was abusive for as long as I can remember. Verbally. Physically.

"And trust me when I say this: I never intended to discuss with anyone other than the closest people in my life, let alone the media. Frankly, it didn't concern anyone but me, but it has reached a point where I have to think outside my own box.

“I have to think about the people out there, same as me, who keep silent when their family member, their partner, their friend puts them into the same position. Over and over.

"I have to think about people who want to love someone regardless of their gender, same as me, but can't because they're told it's not right.

"I have to think about every child that never gets the opportunity to grow into something they want to be because someone says they should be something else.

"And I want the world to see who has been sitting on the top of their beloved hotel chain all this time. A man who blames a child for the suicide of his depressed wife. A man who tells his child to stop being weak when he cries. And a man who thinks physical assault is the appropriate reaction when his son comes out to him.

"To answer your question: no, my bar is not modeled after the reputation people assigned me to in high school. I want it marketed as a place where you can shed all your layers and be fully, unapologetically yourself. That's it."

Fujimoto nods blinks at his notes, then finally looks at Dazai. "That's —" He visibly fights to figure out the right words to say. An apology? A useless "I'm sorry that happened"? However, when he speaks, there is no trace of hesitation anymore. Dazai's vaguely impressed, although given that Ranpo sent him here, it's not surprising that Dazai got someone this sharp. "The injuries. Do I understand correctly that your father caused them after you came out to him?"

"Yes."

Fujimoto's back straightens as he considers the following question carefully. "What drove you to make that decision? To come out to your father?"

"Besides the simple desire to be who I am instead of who my father wanted me to be?" Dazai lets out a low chuckle, and leans back against the couch, draping one arm over it as his gaze drifts towards the camera filming him. "Let's just say that it would have come to light anyway. The only question was whether I got to say the words myself or not."

See, Dazai's not a sadistic monster. He's not about to utter Nobuko's name on national television and ensure that the internet tears her to pieces. However, if Akiko happens to mention her preferences for extortion, as well as her opinion on same-sex couples to everyone inside and out of their circle? Well, that's out of his control. After all, social status is what she has been after all this time. Her name will definitely be known now. They're basically doing her a favor.

"One more question," Fujimoto says. "You mentioned love. Is there a name, perhaps a face we can attach to that word?"

Dazai smiles politely. "The person in question knows who they are. That's all that matters."

Setting Sun stocks to fall 40% after Dazai Osamu's shocking interview about father and chairman of the company.

Dazai Osamu's Lupin Bar breaks record with sold-out preorder tickets to the year's most anticipated opening party!

How Dazai Osamu's interview went viral across the world and what it tells us about domestic abuse.

Who is Dazai Osamu's infamous lover? A list of potential candidates.

The last article finally stirs enough curiosity in Chuuya to click on the damn link. There's a text that sums up the interview. Having watched it already a hundred times, Chuuya skips it and jumps straight to the list of Dazai's "potential lovers."

Number one: Ranpo Edogawa.

"Aside from the obvious fact that Ranpo is the head of the same news outlet

that aired Dazai Osamu's viral interview, as well as having the exclusive rights to pictures of the eagerly anticipated opening party of the Lupin Bar, an anonymous insider source tells us that the two men have been friends for almost ten years now. What better trope is there than friends to lovers? If you ask us, we're definitely team #PowerCouple and #DaRan."

A snort slips past Chuuya's lips. Wow... just wow.

Granted, the news site isn't entirely wrong, but the theory comes a few years too late. After New Year's Eve, Chuuya was curious and asked about Dazai's past hook-ups and what exactly "friendcest" meant in their group, and well — at some point, Dazai and Ranpo actually had a thing, but that's all it was. A thing. It seems like Dazai had no problems doing casual.

Until Chuuya.

Not that Chuuya has any ground to say something because he was fine having meaningless hook-ups as well.

Until Dazai.

What a pair they make.

The second name on the list is Oda.

Since he's more private, there's less "evidence," but again, a mysterious insider, apparently, has told the media that they're good friends. Obviously, that's immediately translated into being something more than that. Fucking ridiculous.

There's Kunikida, too, and Tanizaki, and —

Chuuya.

There's a picture of *Chuuya*, leaving the house in an oversized hoodie and shades because the fucking paparazzi have been haunting the house — even though Dazai doesn't live here anymore — ever since the interview aired. Chuuya not only looks ridiculous in that picture, but the headline calls him "the au pair" instead of his name. Which is fair because he *is* the au pair, but damn. Everyone gets a ship name except him? When it's Chuuya that —

Nevermind.

With a scowl, he starts reading.

"Another possible candidate could be the au pair boy who has been living with the Tsushimas since September. There is not much known about him, except that he's french and that supposedly sparks have been flying between him and Dazai. And who doesn't love a secret affair with the host-brother? Now THAT'S what we call a #FrenchKiss."

There's a fucking poll too, asking the readers who they think could be Dazai's infamous lover or whatever it is that they call him. Chuuya wants to click away, really, but his fingers accidentally slip, and whoops —

Huh.

It's a near-tie between Chuuya and Ranpo. Underneath the poll, the comment section seems to be pretty active, but there's only so much he can process right now. He does send the link into the group chat, though, partly because he has to wait for another half-hour until Sigma's here for their sort of goodbye lunch date slash shopping trip, partly because it's hilarious, and the group has been sending all kinds of ridiculous news articles into the chat in the last two days.

Not even five seconds later his phone lights up with new texts.

Yosano: oh honey, why would you read that

Ranpo: so true

Ranpo: i'm team daran too

Tanizaki: shouldn't you be team odaran??? or ranpoda???

Ranpo: well, i'm TRYING

Oda: No comment.

Ranpo: see what I'm dealing with here

Ranpo: dazai never treated me this way

Yosano: very weird that dazai comes out AS BI MIND YOU and the list is just full of men? and i wasn't even mentioned?

Tanizaki: Yosano-san, you literally have a girlfriend?

Yosano: so?

Higuchi: but your relationship was fake 🕶

Dazai: sorry to disappoint but the only valid name on that list is the au pair boy

Dazai: team french kiss all the way

It's so — it's such a small comment, but the way Chuuya's stomach bottoms out when he reads the words, it feels like so much more. Which is funny considering nothing has changed. Chuuya's still going home. Dazai's still staying. With so little time left, however, it's hard to stay away from each other instead of using the time they still have.

Ranpo: that's rude AND incorrect

Yosano: boo you whore

Higuchi: so wait.

Higuchi: does that mean what I think it means?

Tanizaki: omg!

Chuuya: lol

Higuchi: Okay, I'm confused.

Kouyou: □♀□□♀□□♀□

Yosano: everyone is

Before Chuuya can reply again — not that he would know what to say anyway — his phone buzzes with an incoming call from Dazai.

"Hi."

"Hey," Dazai's voice greets him. "Nice hoodie in that picture. It seems vaguely familiar."

Chuuya lets his head rest against the arm of the couch, biting his cheek to stop himself from doing anything stupid like grinning. "You never even wear any of your hoodies. They're a waste of space in your closet."

"Like I said," Dazai clicks his tongue, "nice. What are you doing?"

"Waiting for Sigma."

"Sigma, huh?" Dazai doesn't sound annoyed, per se, but Chuuya's not

stupid enough to believe that the man is actually happy to hear the name what with everything that happened on his birthday night. "I'm surprised you're still friends."

"Well, we are. Jealous?"

"That depends on what you plan on doing with him."

Chuuya's guts twitch. "I need something to wear for tonight." The opening of Lupin. The final party. Chuuya's second last night in Yokohama. "Sigma can come as well, right?"

"As long as he doesn't bring any of his little friends."

"Uh, no. You of all people should know Fyodor's not even in town."

Dazai's father unsurprisingly didn't go down without a fucking fight, but the claims he made against his own son in return forced them — *Dazai* to work with Fyodor again. Now there are quite a few more charges around Tsushima's neck than assault and battery. Nothing about it is pretty or easy, but in the end, the interview Dazai did turn out to be a thousand times more effective than any of them ever thought. His story didn't only spread across all of Japan, but across the entire continent and beyond, thousands of Twitter posts, news articles, and TV channels discussing what happened to him, the voices only growing louder after Tsushima got even more charges. So what remains now are legal matters — tedious but important.

"I know that Dostoevsky isn't," Dazai replies, "but I wasn't fond of the blonde clown either."

"Yeah, well, don't worry. It's just Sigma."

"Just Sigma," Dazai parrots, and Chuuya can't help but laugh. "He can come, but he's not going to be the one spending the night by your side."

"Yeah, and who is?"

"I will."

"I guess that's fair, considering it's your night."

"Now you're just making me sound like your father whose turn it is to have the child in the divorce."

"Gross," Chuuya mutters, stifling his laughter with a hand before it

dies out. "Are you going to see him now?"

"Hayashi mentioned she's going to stop by. I'll go afterwards."

"Are you sure you don't want me to go with you?"

"It's fine. Really. The only thing my father can do now is say words that I've already heard a thousand times. You..." Dazai's voice stills. “Just be there tonight. That's all."

"Okay," Chuuya murmurs. "I'll see you later. And Dazai?"

"Yeah?"

"I — I... nothing. Be careful. See you tonight."

"Tonight," Dazai agrees.

I love you.

It nearly slipped out of him. Out of seemingly nowhere.

I still love you.

Dazai didn’t do any of this to have people come back begging him for forgiveness. He didn’t even do it out of revenge. It was a mere logical decision. An alternative, even. A business transaction. And yet, a small empty part of him takes satisfaction in that leeching expression on Hayashi’s face as she apologizes for something she supposedly had never even noticed until a few days ago.

The kid lost in the shadows — finally found.

“— I’ve stayed up the whole night thinking about it, and I can’t even begin to describe how sorry I am. I should have looked harder. I should have put a stop to it. I should have questioned what happened more. You were just such an independent kid from the beginning that I falsely assumed you didn’t need someone else to try to replace your mother. But you did. You needed someone to stand up for you when it mattered, and I didn’t, I –”

“Hayashi-san,” Dazai interrupts her after several dreadful minutes of this, “why don’t you save yourself the breath and stop here?”

First, she gapes. Then she scowls. “I am trying to apologize here, and you will listen.”

“I will do whatever I please, and it’s not an apology that I need from you, but something else." Dazai can only nod as she frowns at him. "Your word that you'll be on the right side of the trial.”

Dazai figured they would be going to court anyway, even if his father didn’t manage to talk himself out of it, but now that the story made worldwide news, the case will be more important and more anticipated than ever.

A delicate business, especially with the new documents that were brought to life mysteriously after Tsushima's team of lawyers made claims that Dazai was a mentally unstable substance user. Mentally ill he might be, but not enough to be unable, to tell the truth.

Hayashi’s sour expression shifts into a tentative nod. “Of course, Osamu. Whatever you need.”

“I don’t want you to lie for me,” Dazai tells her quietly, “but if you ever did see things that you weren’t able to identify back then… the trial would be a great place to start remembering.”

She’s ashamed. That much is obvious. Part of Dazai wants to push a little harder until she feels just as small as he did whenever her gaze looked through him. Part of him feels pity for her. The man that she thought to love is not real. Never has been.

“Another thing,” Dazai adds before forgetting.

“Yes?”

“Take good care of my siblings. I want them to be able to look back at their childhood and not think about the piece of shit they once called daddy. They deserve better than that."

“Your siblings...”

“That is what I said. Speaking of which…” Dazai looks past his kitchen bar at the two kids playing video games on his TV. Funny, little creatures. “… I want to have a few minutes alone with them."

Dazai is ashamed, too, when the uncomfortable feeling of nervosity settles in his stomach as he approaches his siblings. It’s been a while since he bothered to talk to them. “Hey, kiddos… how are you doing?”

“What’s happened with your eyes?” Gin asks, staring up at him.

Ryuu looks equally puzzled but because of something else. “Why are you talking to us, Dazai-san?”

Scratching the back of his neck, Dazai looks back at Hayashi, then back at the kids. God, he’s a shit brother. “That’s a funny story, actually. Want me to tell you guys while we play a few rounds? How’s that sound, eh?”

They both shrug, allowing him to join as if it was a totally ordinary thing to do.

Dazai will try to work towards a future where it is. Grabbing one of the controllers, he sits down. “So you see…”

"This one?" Chuuya asks aloud, scowling. The very next moment, he tosses the blazer aside, though. "Nope. Too boring. Maybe this? Nah. That's not made for short people like me. Fuck. What about this one, huh?" He turns to Sigma. "No, you're right. It looks ugly."

"Chuuya."

"Huh?"

"You're not even looking at the clothes."

"Ehhh," Chuuya makes a face, glancing around the store but not seeing anything worth looking at, "I know. I'm just —"

"Nervous?"

"Yeah. Is that stupid?"

Sigma's smile is way too nice. "I'll never really understand what you see in that guy, especially after what he did, but it's not my place to judge you. I'm here for support. And fashion advice."

"It is your place to do that, actually," Chuuya mutters as Sigma spots something on the other end of the store and, with two hands on Chuuya's shoulders start guiding them towards it. "We're friends, so it's your duty to call me out when I'm being a —" Chuuya's mouth snaps shut, seeing what Sigma sees. "Oh."

"How about a dress? You're fine wearing them, right?"

"Yeah." There's no way he'd say no to something this gorgeous. "Totally fine."

"Good," he hears Sigma say. "Then try it on. You'll be the hottest person in the room."

—

The last few days made Tsushima Gen'emon age ten decent years. His jaw isn't clean-shaven anymore. The circles under his eyes were darker than the night falling over the day. And his suit is wrinkly, having seen better days as well.

Interesting.

Very interesting to see what hides underneath a giant when you peel away a few layers.

And by interesting, Dazai means pathetic.

"Aren't you proud of me, father? I made the business deal of the century. Trust me. The media will not forget this one for a while." Dazai theatrically swipes his open palm through the air, revealing invisible letters. "Businessman of the year revealed to be an abusive piece of shit and bigot."

"Do you really think you'll win this?"

Dazai's head tips sideways.

"No amount of fancy works will hide the traces of junk in your veins, son. They'll see all the shit you're on. They'll know that you're just as unstable as your mother. Everyone will know that you're just —" The words come, but they slip through him.

Dazai has won. He did. And he will still win even if, by some miracle, his father's claims will gain any substance.

Because Tsushima's reputation is already ruined. He was forced to resign from his position as Charmain from the company. He's public enemy number one in the eyes of the youth: a cold-blooded capitalist and conservative. No amount of legal victories will fix what he has lost in the last few days and what he will continue to lose as long as Dazai's breathing. The damage is irreversible.

"You always get so emotional," Dazai tells him, sighing loudly. "You should calm down."

"Don't you fucking talk down to me! I'm your father!"

“Last I heard, you claimed not to be. Are you sure you’re all right? Perhaps early signs of dementia?”

“Dazai – stop this charade now — I’ll invest in your damn bar, just take back your claims —”

Dazai gets up from his seat, shoving his hands into the pockets of his pants. “Begging is not very manly.” Then: “Oh, and I quit. In case your tiny brain hasn’t grasped that yet. Good afternoon.”

Despite it all, the sad truth is that the tiny little thorn that somehow survived inside his organs wanes at that. A tiny piece that remembers the few rare but vivid moments from a past long forgotten, when they were still a family of three, and his father still smiled at him before Dazai learned how to speak.

Even that will fade with time, too.

Dazai's bar is filled to the brim with people. So many of them that it takes Chuuya and Sigma a decent amount of time to push through the crowd, let alone spot any of their friends and get to them, especially with that damned leg boot Chuuya forced himself to wear tonight.

It's a hilarious contrast: the skin-tight, glittery black dress clinging to him and the gigantic, ugly boot on his leg. Chuuya might not like it, even hate it a little inside, but hey, it doesn't stop anyone from shooting him appreciative glances; it doesn't stop his friends from showering him in compliments, either. Chuuya downs a couple of cocktails at the table goes to grab more with Kouyou, and that's when he spots him.

The instant Dazai's eyes meet his across the room, the whole, loud and colorful world of people and music and drinking around them fades out. You know the moment the girl comes down the stairs with her prom dress and her date sees her, holding back his cheesy smile? It feels somewhat like this. Except Chuuya's not at a prom, he's at the opening party of his host brother slash fuck buddy slash sometimes friend slash the worst person he's ever met. And Dazai isn't his date either.

They are just two people who happen to share quite the... history with each other.

"I thought we were over the eye-fucking thing by now," Kouyou mutters next to him as she runs her nails over her forehead. "But that's

my cue to find my girlfriend and eye-fuck *her* the entire night."

Chuuya rolls his eyes. "You love me!"

"Somehow, I do. Don't do anything too stupid, all right?" Kouyou ruffles his hair, then disappears in the crowd, and Chuuya's left alone.

Well, not alone.

A hundred different people squeezed into the building, a sea of beautiful, interesting clothes and hair colors and excited faces — most of them drawn here because of the interview, Chuuya assumes, and the bar, of course. He's seen it quite a few times before, mostly when they needed a place to fuck, but being here when it's open and full and gloriously triumphant, Chuuya feels like his heart is about to burst with pride.

Dazai really did it. The idiot pulled it all off.

And, last of all, Chuuya's not alone because Dazai is there to replace Kouyou within seconds. His eyes rake over Chuuya's body like a physical touch, burning imprints everywhere they travel. Chuuya has to swallow past the fluttery thing in his throat to press out a smile and bump his knuckles against Dazai's shoulders.

"The man of the hour," he jokes with a smile that threatens to overflow with too many emotions if he isn't careful. "How's it feel to be the trending topic on the internet for the last god knows how many days now?"

"Not nearly as gratifying as seeing you..." Dazai almost goes cross-eyed as he stares at the subtle curve of Chuuya's hips. "...in this. Scratch that. Not even coming close —"

"You are ridiculous," Chuuya says because it's the only thing that doesn't betray the rollercoaster inside his stomach. "I figured I could, I don't know, dress up for the occasion. It is worth celebrating, you know. You made it, Dazai. You created your own fucking kingdom."

He doesn't want to say it was all worth it because — was it really? They could have pulled this off together from the start as well. They could have done it somehow. Dazai could be here, celebrating this very moment but with Chuuya's hand in his.

Dazai's smile is so light and carefree, though, that Chuuya can't stand to ruin it. He is happy for him. He'll always be happy for everything

the man in front of him achieved. It sure as hell didn't come without a price. The shadows on Dazai's face speak enough for that.

Dazai's head tips sideways as he offers him another beautiful smile. "Thank me by giving me a dance?"

Chuuya looks around them. People are mingling, yeah, and he's pretty sure there are enough drunk people that no one will mind, but —

"Here? Right now?"

Dazai offers him his hand. "Yes."

Well, it's not like Chuuya will see any of these strangers again. Literally. With a smirk of his own, he accepts Dazai's offer, lacing their fingers together before letting Dazai pull him into his chest and starting an unconventional, perfect rhythm, one that belongs only to the two of them. The music is too fast, too happy, and Chuuya thinks he catches a few people shooting them weird looks, but he can't even force himself to acknowledge any of it as he buries his face in Dazai's chest.

How someone Chuuya likes so much can make him feel so hollow inside will forever remain a mystery.

Dazai's hand swipes over the length of his exposed back, his touch feather-light, making every nerve inside him tremble with fervor. The other one tucks a loose strand of hair behind Chuuya's ear, then strokes his chin, thumb gentle and soft. "How about a round of dirty laundry, huh?"

Chuuya's laughter is muffled before he looks up, raising his brow. "That stupid game again?"

"It's not stupid, and I seem to remember that I still owe you a couple of truths."

"Well, if you say it like that." The beat of the current song drops but the two of them continue to sway in lazy circles, the world around them all but forgotten. "Go on, Osamu. Unpack."

He likes the way Dazai's eyes darken when Chuuya says his name.

O-sa-mu.

Only three syllables, and yet such a reaction. Dazai really isn't all that

complicated as he pretends to be.

"I —" Chuuya's breath stutters when Dazai leans down, and the ghost of his warm breath rushes over the shell of his ear as his hands settle on Chuuya's hips, thumbs digging in and pulling him closer against him. "— wanted to kiss you since I saw you strolling around the house in your pink bathrobe, and I have never, not even for one second, stopped thinking about kissing you since then."

The first thought that rushes through Chuuya's mind is: ridiculous. That bathrobe is hideous. The second is: never?

"We kissed a lot at one point," Chuuya tries to point out in that snarky tone he has adapted whenever speaking to Dazai except that it comes out breathy and desperate, probably because he is both breathy and desperate. "Even then?"

"Especially then."

"I don't know whether to take that as a compliment or as an insult."

"Take it for what is. Me begging."

Chuuya pushes Dazai away with a gentle hand on his chest only to arch his eyebrow, lips twitching. "I thought I told you begging wouldn't fix anything? And you call yourself smart."

"Doesn't mean you don't like it."

Chuuya's traitorous face exposes him before he can school his breathy inhale. Dazai's hand slips a few inches further, cupping the curve of his ass, drawing him back against his body. Fuck.

"Don't you want that?" Dazai whispers against the shell of his ear. "Me on my knees? Eating you out for hours until you finally forgive me?"

Perhaps wearing a dress tonight was not a good idea. For now, Chuuya can hide any evidence of a boner by pressing as close to Dazai as possible, but... that's only a temporary solution. "I might be horny," Chuuya mutters and pinches Dazai cheek, "but you can't bribe me with sexual favors."

"Please." Oh, god. "Please, Chuuya." Dazai's lips are on his jaw now, mouthing at the skin and pressing kisses over the length of his neck. Chuuya vaguely wonders whether someone can be arrested for public indecency if they're the owner of the place. Probably not, right? "Just

want to kiss you. Want to feel you on my lips one last time."

"God, you're pathetic," Chuuya murmurs, but fuck, he is so good at being pathetic that his dick is twitching painfully under the silk of his dress. "How many times do — ah, do I have to tell you it's not — happening, hm?"

"A thousand? A million times?"

"Stupid —"

"Really, really stupid for you."

God.

Chuuya takes matters into his own hands, letting his fingers trail around the slope of Dazai's neck, free of bandages, before he brings his lips to the corner of Dazai's nose, that place where he sometimes gets dimples when he smiles. "You really want it?"

"Yeah."

"It'll only hurt more," he breathes out.

"I don't care. I want to kiss you."

"You're so pathetic," Chuuya reminds him again, and his hands curl in the mop of Dazai's hair, "but so am I."

Chuuya tugs him down, but Dazai goes willingly. His mouth is warm and hard, and his hands slide up the length of Chuuya's dress until Dazai can cup his face, trying to draw him even closer because it's never enough. They cling to each other, and Chuuya has no idea how he managed to stop himself from doing this the last two months. They kiss, and he doesn't know how he's supposed to ever love someone else as much as he loves Dazai. It's impossible. The thought leaves him empty inside.

It creates a hole so deep and hollowing that Chuuya feels like he's bleeding out against Dazai's lips. "I —" Chuuya's breath is heavy, and stuttering as his fingers curl in the collar of Dazai's black button-up shirt. "Dazai — I just —" Glancing up, he finds Dazai staring back with dark but understanding eyes. It's enough to make Chuuya breathe a little easier.

"My office," Dazai decides, panting, "now."

He doesn't wait for Chuuya's answer. They both know he'd have said yes anyway.

Their fingers laced together, Chuuya follows Dazai as he weaves them through the thick crowd, dodging people left and right with breathless laughter.

Just for a moment, Chuuya wonders what others, what his friends see when they look at this picture. Making the same mistake again. Giggling like teenagers while they're at it. Ignoring the fact that this is only a distraction from an ending that will be way less pretty than tonight.

Only for a moment, though, because in the next one, Dazai's opening the door to his office, flicking on the light, and then shoving every single thing on his desk to the floor with his arm.

"Oh, my g—" Chuuya gasps the rest of the word into Dazai's warm mouth when the idiot pushes him on the same desk, hands bracing on either side of him as his tongue swipes against his lips and makes him open up with dizzying speed.

God, indeed. "Nevermind," Chuuya pants, his fingers trembling as he tries to undo the buttons on Dazai's stupid shirt. With a low curse, he decides to forgo it and slides his hands underneath the material instead. "The desk was a — ah — a good decision."

He feels the curve of Dazai's smug smile against his lips. "I know you'd like it. I always do."

"Don't get — ah, fuck, cocky —"

"But I'm right, love." Not only that, but good at multitasking as well.

Dazai undoes Chuuya with every fever-hot, slick slide of lips while his fingers swoop under the hem of his dress and steal the thing he's wearing. Chuuya scowls when Dazai leans away to arch a brow as he dangles the black lace in front of him.

"What?"

"You planned this, didn't you?"

"I don't need to plan fucking you to wear lingerie. I like lingerie. It makes me feel good, especially when I'm wearing this thing." Chuuya's eyes flicker down to the damn leg boot around his ankle.

“Hey, look at me,” Dazai’s fingers are firm around his chin, “you’re the hottest person in the room. In the city. Fuck, even in all of Japan. With or without the leg boot.”

“Don’t waste your time saying stupid shit,” Chuuya tugs impatiently at his shirt, “when you could be fucking me instead."

“Who said anything about fucking?”

Chuuya lets his hand slid down the hem of Dazai's pants, feeling the slope of his bulge. “I’m pretty sure this does.”

With an aggravating grin, Dazai readjusts himself in his pants and steps between Chuuya’s legs, nose brushing against his ear. “My cock can wait. My mouth, on the other hand…”

Chuuya’s head tosses back as his throat gets peppered with bites and kisses, nice and wet, legs instinctively spreading farther — at least, as far as the tight dress allows. “You did mean mouth on —" His breath hitches when Dazai’s teeth graze the soft spot under his jaw. “— on my — dick, right? Not just — this — ?”

“Patience,” Dazai murmurs, and somewhere in the back of his head, Chuuya slaps his own head for asking such a stupid question. As if Dazai would ever give a clear answer anyway. “You can be patient, right?

Dazai travels higher again, and his hand cups the back of Chuuya’s head, holding him still, as his tongue first swirls around one of the piercings, making him groan wetly in the back of his throat, then takes that same lip between his, suckling lightly.

Yeah — god yeah, Chuuya can be patient. He could wait a hundred years for this. Fuck, he did wait months —

Dazai’s fingers trail up and down the length of his thighs, swooping dangerously close to where he wants it and forcing the dress to slip higher as well. Hissing softly, Chuuya breaks the kiss when his cock, already hard, brushes against the rough material of Dazai’s slacks. The air in the room burns coldly against his bare flesh.

“I know you would,” Dazai’s mouth wanders lower again, down the sharp cut of his jaw and the curve of his neck before he descends between his legs altogether. “You’ve always been so good, huh?”

With a breathy huff, Chuuya tangles his fingers in Dazai’s tousled hair.

He looks good this way. On his knees. Eyes blown wide. His pale cheeks flushed. But he'd look even better actually doing what he talks about. "You're so annoying," Chuuya reminds him. "Now, get to it already, would you?"

Dazai chuckles softly, then tugs at the dress until it's around his waist, making Chuuya's cock twitch, and lowers his mouth to his thighs like a starving man. Somewhere far too close, there are a few hundred people having fun, drinking, having a night out, perhaps even waiting for Dazai — the guy that made headlines with his story and also the guy that they came here for. To support him as one of theirs. But none of that matters right now. What always has and will matter is this.

Dazai's lips sucking open-mouthed kisses into the inside of Chuuya's thighs, hands massaging the skin above and below, working out knots and kinks that have crawled into his muscles in the last few days. Chuuya doesn't really expect Dazai to go lower and press feather-light kisses to the sore flesh above the leg boot. It's –

It steals Chuuya's breath to see something he hates so much get worshipped all the same by Dazai. He doesn't know what to think. What to do. So he only watches, blinking through half-lidded eyes.

When Dazai's mouth travels higher again, Chuuya's back instinctively arches, trying to lean closer to that place that makes his guts twitch with curling heat. His fingers clench in his hair again, especially when the bastard makes a show of breathing down his fucking cock without doing anything —

"Come on," Chuuya hisses, yanking his head down. "Do what you came here for, huh?"

"Don't you worry, I am getting exactly what I came here for, love."

"Daza—ah…" Chuuya's eyes flutter shut at the first contact of Dazai's tongue darting out to swirl around his tip, cruelly exploiting every spot that he knows makes Chuuya shudder. "That's better…"

Dazai's hands come to rest on his hipbones, a firm but grounding pressure. A moment later, when Dazai's lips wrap around his head, engulfing him in wet heat, he realizes why. The urge to rock forward and chase the electric coil in his stomach is astronomical, but Dazai's grip is unmoving, both on his hips and around his dick, so Chuuya only tightens the fingers in his hair and lets the pleasure wash over him.

And there is so much pleasure.

Dazai's lips keep enough suction with every tentative bob of his head that it feels like he's sucking out Chuuya's entire soul out of him, every muscle in his body trembling with staggering desire. Chuuya's mouth mumbles out stuttered words — could be praises, or more *I hate yous*, or maybe even Dazai's name. Chuuya doesn't care. Neither does Dazai, responding to each noise with even more skillful determination to ruin Chuuya with a fucking blowjob.

Dazai only pulls away to take a few breaths before diving back in and taking Chuuya's cock even deeper than before, submerging him in slick, overwhelming warmth. Just in time, Dazai's fingers move from his shaft to his tight-strung balls, kneading the firm flesh, and Chuuya's a goner.

"Ah, fuck, okay, I'm so close —" Chuuya's hips unconsciously push against Dazai's hands to rock forward even as he tries to pry Dazai's mouth off him. Letting him, Dazai's lips tightly, deliciously drag around his length, and Chuuya's vision explodes into white noise as the pleasure snaps and ravages him. With how tight he's holding onto Dazai's hair and how eagerly Dazai is straining against that grip to continue teasing his cock even as shuddering ribbons of come shoot out of him, it must hurt like a motherfucker. But Chuuya's head is still hazy, and Dazai isn't complaining, so.

"You're… so…." Chuuya still has trouble forming coherent thoughts, so he settles on grasping at whatever body part of Dazai's he can get his hands on. "Get back up here."

Dazai's mouth twitches into a smirk that screams trouble. "Who said I was done?"

"If you're going to fuck the energy out of me, then at least use your dick."

"Or, what?"

"Or, I'm not going to let you come tonight."

"Unlike you, patience is my middle name," Dazai quips even though he blindly reaches to open one of the drawers of his desk and grab a small bottle of lube. "I can survive a little edging."

Chuuya huffs, taking that as a challenge. "Not after I'm done with you; no, you won't."

Coating his fingers in lube, Dazai raises a brow at him. “Who’s getting cocky now?”

“Still you.” Chuuya opens his mouth to add something about actual edging and prostate orgasms, but being the cheating liar that he is, Dazai makes sure every single word dissolves into a garbled whimper when he slides two fingers into Chuuya and aims for his prostate without any preamble.

Chuuya’s knuckles turn white as they grip the edge of the desk. It’s so — so — good because he can feel his blood turn hot and heavy again, but he can still feel the lingering shocks from his first orgasm, every nerve inside him overstimulated, and yet —

“Motherfucker,” he manages to hiss through his teeth. “I’ll get you — ah, back for this... one day!”

“I’d like to hear the logistics of that, considering tomorrow is your last day here.” Dazai doesn’t look smug anymore, even if his tone suggests otherwise. Fuck, why does he always have to remind him? Why can’t he just — Chuuya’s eyes sting with the pleasure-pain that bolts through him. “Unless you changed your mind?”

Chuuya’s throat is desert-dry when he shakes his head, eyes squeezed shut to stop anything from tumbling down. “No.”

Nothing has changed. There’s too little time to fix the mess they created. This is just a weird comforting sex thing to avoid talking about anything real.

“Then consider me the winner of this argument,” Dazai says, and he sounds sad, and Chuuya lets out a broken gasp as the pads of the fingers inside him brush his prostate until tears start rolling down his cheeks.

“*Please...*”

“Please what, love?”

“Just don’t stop — don’t ever stop –”

Dazai adds another finger, and Chuuya’s thighs tremble, cock straining against his belly all over again as he fights to cling to some sort of lucidity instead of falling apart into a thousand tiny pieces like his body wants to. “I need you here,” Chuuya slides his hands down Dazai’s face, cups his cheeks, and stares at him with wide, wet eyes.

“Please, I just... I wanna kiss you —”

Dazai’s mouthparts ever so slightly. Within a matter of seconds, he pulls out his fingers. Chuuya’s thighs spread, making space for him so Dazai can get to his feet and kiss him, and the world will be all right again.

Dazai doesn’t think he ever heard Chuuya say the words.

I want to kiss you.

From the get-go, he was always the one who needed it hard and fast, keeping any kind of foreplay to a minimum — if not avoiding it all. And now — especially after all of Dazai's mistakes — Dazai never thought he would be able to kiss him again, lick the lingering taste of bubbly champagne off his lips. Dazai never thought Chuuya would say something like this again.

That patience he bragged about before? It breaks. It spills all over the floor between them.

Perhaps he was lying earlier because Dazai likes his control, but Chuuya — god, it’s always Chuuya who sears through logic like a burning hot flame. It’s always Chuuya who makes Dazai break all his rules.

Always Chuuya.

Dazai’s cock is so hard inside his pants that it’s meddling with both his thoughts and actions, but he nonetheless refuses to rush. He wants to etch every little thing about kissing Chuuya into his memory so that when this is over once and for all, Dazai will be able to remember what it was like to be thoroughly and painfully alive.

They kiss like it’s their last chance to do it.

Dazai grabs him so tight that whoever comes after him will find traces of Dazai on Chuuya’s skin and mouth. Traces of this writhing, livid thing between them. Chuuya clings to him like Dazai will vanish, leave again, if he doesn’t hold on tight enough.

In the end, though, they’re both just prolonging the inevitable ending.

—

Chuuya reaches for Dazai’s pants, blindly fumbling with the zipper

because he cannot stop kissing Dazai. It feels like the end. And the end isn't enough. He can't let go, but he can't change anything either, and — he's falling apart on it.

His breath stutters when he finally gets his hands around Dazai's cock, pulsing under his touch. Chuuya only pulls away to look for the lube, but Dazai's faster, his fingers still slick with it as interlace with Chuuya's, the lube rubbing off on him until they can stroke his cock together.

Chuuya watches – they both do, panting against each other's mouths until he leans in to catch Dazai's lips once again. Like this, hands and mouth joined, Dazai lines up, the head of his cock pulsating against Chuuya's rim. The need that ravages him right now is devastating, so intense and overwhelming that it feels like it's something tangible, the next sip of whiskey for an alcoholic or a shot of heroin for a drug addict. Like he will die if he doesn't get it. It hurts. It hurts to want something so much, to l —

Dazai pushes inside, slow so that they can feel every inch. Their kiss becomes open-mouthed and sloppy, more teeth and heavy breaths against each other.

"You —" Dazai's forehead rests against Chuuya as he stays buried inside him, not moving but not leaving either. Never leaving. "You feel so good, love. You always feel so good." Chuuya's lungs tremble. His hands clutch Dazai's neck like a lifeline. "You make me feel so goddamn alive."

Chuuya's laughter is broken, hiccupping. "You make me feel like — I'm dancing."

Dazai twitches inside him, lifts his hand to cup his face, and kisses him again so that when he pulls out all the way only to roll his hips forward, deep and hard, he can drink up the moan that escapes Chuuya.

The rhythm is not brutal and rushed. Not tonight. It's so deep that Chuuya can barely breathe around it. Quick enough to make the pressure inside him tighten with each thrust. Slow enough to fuck Chuuya thoroughly and let him feel everything.

He wasn't lying earlier.

It does feel like the intoxicating thrill of dancing.

Being with Dazai, even when they aren't fucking, and it's just the two of them in the kitchen messing around and bickering, it has always felt like dancing. Leaping through the air. Free-falling. A bone-rattling, breath-taking performance.

Maybe that's why Chuuya felt a magnetic pull towards him even when Dazai was only the annoying son making stupid comments and being borderline rude. Because Dazai has always been the melody of his favorite song to dance to stuck in his head. Every melody that he ever loved.

"I —" Chuuya's mouth shudders against Dazai, back arching to scoot closer, to feel more, to feel everything. "I l—"

He can't say it, still. Maybe that's the problem.

He might never be able to say it again without fearing that this final admission will finish a game that Dazai's playing with him again, even though Chuuya knows it couldn't be farther from the truth. But that tiny seed of doubt is there, inside him, and no matter how many times Chuuya tries to reach between his ribs and dig for that seed, to rip it out with bare hands and let go — it's too deep. Too late. It's everywhere.

Dazai's hand tightens around his face, and he presses a kiss against the corner of his mouth, to his dimples, to the slender curve under his nose. "I know."

Does he, though?

Chuuya shakes his head, torn between crying because of how good it feels right now and because of how good it will never feel again; desperation draping over him like a second skin.

Dazai's thumbs stroke his cheeks. "Are you close?"

Chuuya nods deliriously as his nails dig into Dazai's back. So close to shattering apart. Dazai brushes his lips against him, feather-light so that when he speaks, Chuuya can feel every word ghost across his mouth. "I love you." His legs clamp up, drawing Dazai closer. "I love you." Dazai's cock hits just the right spot, making him cry out silently before Dazai sets up a mind-rattling grind right there and — "I love you. I love you so much I don't know what it's like not to love you anymore."

When Chuuya comes for the second time, his cheeks are feverish and

glistening with tears. Dazai hasn't even touched his cock, but the orgasm feels a little like dying anyway, two spurts of come ruining Dazai's shirt. It feels like the pleasure never stops either. Dazai drags it out for so long that Chuuya doesn't know whether he skips the oversensitivity and jumps straight to his next orgasm, or whether it lasts that long —

but Dazai is still fucking him, pushing him down on the desk now so he can drape his entire body over him while his hips gain speed. Chuuya's so gone he can only cling to him, coaxing Dazai's orgasm out of him by clenching around him and kissing him, all teeth and tongue, and whispering incoherent words that only the two of them understand.

When Dazai finally stumbles over the edge, he stills almost entirely save for his cock, pulsing inside his tight heat and trying to mark this intimate, secret part of Chuuya as his and only his.

Because Dazai loves him. He loves him so goddamn much, but it's not enough.

It never is quite enough.

The kisses Chuuya slides over his lips are hard and demanding, same as Dazai's, wanting to drink up that incredible sound of raw loss of control that Dazai claims not to have. But it's here. Right here. Sweeter than any wine Chuuya's ever tasted.

And still, it's not enough.

This can't be the last kiss.

The last time they fuck.

The last night.

It can't be.

The instant Dazai gets a hold of himself again, every nerve inside him raw and exposed, he lifts his eyes only to see the same agonizing insatiability in Chuuya.

"My place," he whispers against Chuuya's trembling lips. "Wanna go to my place? One last time?"

“Your party…”

“Fuck the party.”

Chuuya laughs, and Dazai wishes he could bottle it up and listen to it every time he feels the usual numbness of life settle over his skin. “Some business owner you are.”

“I did my job by coming up with an excellent market strategy.”

Chuuya shakes his head. Only Dazai would refer to something as traumatic as coming out to his father as a successful marketing strategy. It was a sacrifice. And it turned out remarkably well, beyond all expectations. But Dazai should have never been cornered into coming up with the idea in the first place. No one should.

“The bar can survive a night without me.”

“Okay. But I have one condition.”

Dazai's eyes squint curiously.

“Not your place. A hotel.” Chuuya’s eyes widen when he notices his mistake. “Not your father’s either! Some hotel.”

Dazai muffles his chuckle in Chuuya’s hair before whispering, “You do realize my walls are thicker than that of a hotel, right?”

Chuuya pinches his chest. “I don’t care about that. I just – don’t get me wrong. Your place is nice, but it’s…” His voice trails off. Chuuya's not sure how to best formulate his thoughts.

“A lot of memories?” Dazai guesses.

Chuuya's chest falls with something akin to gratitude for being understood. “Yeah...”

Chuuya thinks it’s unfair that all the good memories are tainted by a few bad ones, but the bad ones cut so deep that they’re impossible to overlook. The first time Dazai said *I love you* and Chuuya walked out of the door. The night Chuuya begged him for an explanation, and Dazai buried Chuuya's trust in him twelve feet underground. The day Chuuya had to hold Dazai in his arms as he lay in his bed, full of bruises and on the verge of a mental breakdown.

A lot of memories, yes.

“I feel the same,” Dazai murmurs before drawing away to offer Chuuya a lop-sided smile. “So a hotel, you say?"

Chapter End Notes

hnghfhjddj only two more chapters to go

Chapter 30: A Promise

Chapter Notes

> Warnings: explicit sexual content, somnophilia, and tears. Lots of tears :')

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They choose the most decent-sounding hotel nearby, although judging by the way Dazai effortlessly leads them from the lobby to their room, he isn't a stranger to this place. Either because it's required knowledge working in this branch of business, or because he was here with somebody else.

When the door clicks shut, Chuuya expects heat. That one-last-time kind of passion. Falling over each other and fucking on the floor. Instead, a thick layer of sadness falls over him.

Their last time…

Behind him, two hands settle on his shoulders, fingers massaging the bare skin. "How about a bath?"

"God," Chuuya groans and leans back against him, sinking into Dazai's ridiculously gifted hands, "please, I'm begging."

Dazai insists that Chuuya takes a breather and looks at the menu for room service while he lets the water in, so that's exactly what he does. Chuuya flops down sideways on the king-sized bed and flips through the booklet. He doesn't feel hungry — not a rare occurrence when he's with Dazai. It's like his body is so full of other feelings that he can barely fit anything else inside, including food. But after the dancing, the office sex, and the bottle of champagne Dazai stole on their way out — well, technically, he didn't steal because it's *his* bar — Chuuya figures their bodies need a snack. And the chocolate-banana crêpes look insanely appealing.

When Dazai comes back, he's stark-naked, and for a moment, Chuuya simply lies there and blinks up at him, his brain cells ceasing their function at the sight.

"Why aren't you undressed yet?"

"You told me to look at the… menu…" Dazai walks towards him,

tossing the menu in question to the side. “I didn’t realize you meant yourself,” Chuuya adds, a little breathy, as Dazai goes down on his knees once again.

To Chuuya's surprise and childish delight, Dazai seems flustered by that remark. “Leave the complimenting to me, chibi. Now let’s get you out this, granted, gorgeous but currently unnecessary, dress.”

“But I’m right —” Complying, Chuuya raises his arms so Dazai can tug the dress off him. “— you are very handsome, you know. I’m pretty sure you tell me that yourself a few thousand times a day.”

“It’s different when you say it,” Dazai quietly admits before digging his fingers into the flesh of his ankle. “How’s the pain?”

“Fine. A bit sore.”

After Dazai notified the responsible managers and team administrators of his absence, they both decided they didn’t want to run into any of their friends and waste precious time explaining the situation, so they made a quick exit. It would have been faster if Chuuya had agreed to let Dazai carry him, but he was adamant about using his own damn legs. It wasn’t too bad. When it hurt, he stopped and tried to readjust his weight. And once they reached the hotel, he did agree to let Dazai carry him piggyback, which must have made a funny picture now that Chuuya thinks back on it. A guy in a mismatched suit — because of certain body fluids on his original one — and a guy in a dress clinging to his back like a jetpack, waiting to check into a hotel. There were quite a few stares, and Chuuya’s prettyyyyy sure he saw someone try to take a picture. If they become a meme… well, at least, they’ll both look hot in it.

“Can I take off your leg boot?” Dazai asks him.

“It’s kind of complicated,” Chuuya hugs his arms around himself, “and not very sexy.”

Dazai rolls his eyes. “I am the captain of the ship complicated.”

“Are you really comparing yourself with my leg boot, Dazai? Wow, your narcissism is at a new low today.”

“Welcome to Dazai Osamu, uncensored,” Dazai jokes as he starts fiddling with the mechanics of the massive thing around Chuuya’s ankle. "We hope you enjoy your stay.”

It's moments like these — the gentle, natural intimacy between them — that Chuuya will miss the most, he thinks. He's never had anyone he felt this comfortable with, anyone who knew his body just as well as him, and anyone who not only refuses to look away but takes his hand into theirs while doing so.

This time, when Dazai slides his arms under him to pick him up bridal-style, Chuuya doesn't protest. His feet are sore. It's just a tiny trip to the bathroom. And it's freaking amazing — why lie. The lean muscles on Dazai's chest warm when Chuuya rests his cheek against them. The bathtub is —

It's 1) gigantic, 2) full of bubbles, and 3) has quite a handful of roses swimming in the water.

Chuuya's furiously frowning when Dazai places him inside first, then himself, so that Dazai can pull him back against his chest, their legs spreading out. Chuuya slaps his arm as soon as they aren't prone to slipping anymore. "Did you plan this too?!"

Dazai Osamu is a planner. That fact is known to almost everybody by now. But how much of this did he actually foresee? Especially when it was Chuuya who suggested going to a hotel?! Did h—

"Chuuya thinks too highly of me. No, I didn't plan this. I was merely aware of the fact that this hotel offers these roses for free in their bathroom service."

Oh.

Well, that does make more sense.

Relaxing again and sinking back into the warm chest behind him, Chuuya elbows him lightly. "You know this from personal experience?"

"Why?" Dazai's voice sounds aggravatingly amused in his ear. "Jealous?"

"I mean, I don't care that you had past lovers before and between me. I guess. God knows I haven't been a monk either. I just… find it odd that you would take us here."

"I wasn't here with anyone else."

"Hah? Then how do you know?"

Dazai's fingers drive through the strands of Chuuya's hair, playing with it. Fidgeting. Almost as if he's…

"If I tell you, you'll laugh."

"Sometimes I have inappropriate reactions," Chuuya says because it *has* happened before, "but I wouldn't make fun of you. I swear."

Behind him, Dazai's silent, and Chuuya supposes that's the end of the conversation. He is curious now that Dazai mentioned it, but he's not going to push or anything. He just wants to relax and not think for a while.

"When I was still living with my father," Dazai suddenly says, "I used to book a hotel room for myself every once in a while…" Chuuya feels him shrug. "…and do nothing excepts take baths all day long and eat fancy food."

Chuuya doesn't laugh. He smiles, an odd warmth spreading through his chest. "Y'know, that's called self-care. And it's nothing to laugh about. It's cute."

"*Cute*."

"Yeah."

"Hm. My father would ask about the bill later, and I would say that I had to take a weekend off with Yosano. It worked like a charm."

"Cute and clever. It's like I'm taking a bath with a superhuman."

For some reason, Dazai pinches his nipple for that, making Chuuya yelp. "Chuuya's cruel."

"Huh? Only you would consider a few compliments torture."

"I told you. It's… hard."

"I know, but it doesn't mean what I'm saying isn't true. You are clever. You are cute. You are handsome, and beautiful, and sexy. I especially like your co—"

Dazai grabs his chin and crushes their mouths together. It's a tad too rough, too brutal for the conversation they were having, but with a few brushes of lips, the ferocity melts away and leaves a lingering honesty between them.

Well, honesty about pretty much all things but one.

They waste a good hour or two in the bathtub. Dazai makes a mess of his hair, then makes up for it by washing it. Chuuya dozes off at some point. When he blinks awake, his fingers are wrinkly, and the water lukewarm.

By the time, Dazai's throwing away napkins and clearing away the dishes, the first rays of the morning sun start shining through the window. They gently remind Chuuya of their time and how it's slipping like water through his fingers. In about thirty-six hours, he'll be sitting on an airplane back to Paris. Watching Dazai flop down on the bed with a muffled groan, it's hard to believe.

"People never talk about how tired eating makes you."

"We can," Chuuya says, trailing his fingers across the slope of Dazai's neck, "sleep."

Dazai lifts his head, glancing first out of the window, then at Chuuya. "If you want that."

"I want to take a nap with you, and I want the first person to be awake to wake the other one up with sex, and then we can fuck for a few more hours, and nap again, and basically spend the entire day in bed. Here. Just the two of us."

"Nap," Dazai agrees quickly. "Napping is an excellent idea."

Chuuya smiles, and if Dazai notices that it's a little off-kilter, a bit sad, he thankfully doesn't voice it. They turn off the lights, slip out of their yukatas, and crawl under the sheets. Chuuya ends up with his cheek on Dazai's chest, letting his fingers trace one pale scar among many on his wrist.

"What about your friends?" Dazai asks. "Don't you want to say goodbye to them?"

"I already did."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Okay."

"I like this," Chuuya tells him. "Spending my last day here with you. It

just makes sense."

"Host brothers for life," Dazai jokes weakly.

"Pain in the ass for…" Chuuya yawns and lets his heavy lids fall closed. "… life."

Even if Dazai's first thought was, *I hope I wake up first* when Chuuya mentioned wake-up sex, he doesn't do it on purpose. It must be fate. Or simply his insomniac brain following his usual rhythm. Whatever it is, Dazai is grateful because he's wide awake again, and Chuuya is softly snoring, even drooling a bit, next to him.

Yes. He's going to enjoy this.

He starts by peppering sweet, feather-light kisses all over Chuuya's neck and collarbone while his hands stroke up and down his arms, thighs, and stomach. Descending lower tells him that Chuuya's barely even hard, but that's not going to be a problem for long. The few times they spent the night together, mornings always started with a needy redhead grinding his ass against Dazai's morning wood.

Chuuya's lids flutter when Dazai's fingers wrap around his cock to stroke him, nice and slow, but he remains blissfully asleep. And maybe Dazai is, after all, somewhat jealous because even though he gets to suck kisses into Chuuya's neck and play with his chest, at least, Chuuya's still in a place where airports and different countries don't exist as they do here.

Feeling Chuuya fill out in his hands is very much worth it, though.

Before doing anything further, Dazai grabs the lube, then settles between Chuuya's thighs, his arguably most favorite place on earth. Fingers slick, Dazai gives him another few strokes until a soft, dreamy sigh slips out of Chuuya. With this motivation, he leans down to give the tip a bashful hello lick.

It's peaceful like that.

Next to Akiko, Chuuya's the best and most mindful partner he's ever had in bed. A bit demanding and bratty at times, sure, but Dazai knows that if it ever came down to it, Chuuya would always listen. There's still something exciting and relaxing about sucking him off when he's still asleep, even if, judging by the noises that seem to come more and more often, that's going to change very soon. Dazai wouldn't

say that he isn't confident in his skills to give Chuuya what he craves, but sometimes he does wonder whether he could make the experience even better, make it *the best*. Maybe then he'd be able to still that bottomless hunger inside his stomach.

Smearing lube around Chuuya's rim, teasing him with the tip of his finger, Dazai had plans to leave it at that. Some prep to open him up until he can fuck Chuuya awake. But plans change. Especially when Chuuya's hole flutters around him, pink and puffy from last night, and Dazai has to swallow around the tangible urge to feel the same pressure around his tongue.

A change of plans also means a shift in position. Dazai makes sure to be gentle when he grabs one of Chuuya's thighs to roll it over the other so that he's lying sideways, ass perky and gloriously exposed. A muffled, annoyed-sounding grunt echoes through their quiet room, and Dazai muffles his laughter in the flesh that he's about to devour.

"Don't worry, chibi. You will not complain for much longer."

Because Chuuya likes this just as much as Dazai. Digging his fingers into the skin of his ass, he spreads Chuuya's cheeks and leans in to swirl his tongue around his rim. Just to tease and play with him a little, make him release another soft sigh in whatever wet dream he must be stuck with right now. Dazai pushes closer, burying his entire face there as he works the tip of his tongue inside slowly, tentatively at first, then when the muscles around him start relaxing and allowing him in with eager twitching, he pushes his tongue deeper.

Above him, a long, whimpering moan slips past Chuuya's lips, and his hands curl in the sheets. "Ah…"

Dazai lets one hand trail down to Chuuya's perineum and massages the skin there.

Chuuya's entire body clenches up.

And he starts stirring awake.

The first thought that crosses Chuuya's mind when the haze of unconsciousness starts to dissolve around him is *yeah*. He's not sure why — the sheets under him are soft and fluffy, and traces of a very sweet, delightful dream are still lingering in his head and something feels really, really good.

Something inside him. Something wet and soft and si—

Chuuya's eyes fly open; at the same time, the thing in question thrusts into him, fingers digging into the skin of his ass to spread his cheeks and —

Oh.

So that's what's happening.

"D-Dazai?" The word barely gets past his tongue before a breathy gasp replaces it, Chuuya's hands curling in the sheets as Dazai hums, the noise reverberating through Chuuya as his tongue fucks in and out of him.

When he feels Dazai pull away, it's only to hear him say, "Good morning, sweetheart. Had any nice dreams?"

"Fuck off," Chuuya mutters, still feeling like he's half-asleep because of how soft and honey-sweet the pleasure is that flows through his veins. "Y'know, I was thinking about you fucking me awake but —" His muscles jump as Dazai sets his teeth into his ass cheek and bites. Not nicely either. "Ouw! I have a thirteen-hour flight tomorrow, you idiot. I don't want to step on the plane with a bruised ass —"

"Then reschedule your flight." Out of Dazai's mouth, it sounds so casual and simple when they both know exactly that it's everything *but* that. They haven't even breached that topic yet.

Chuuya buries his face in the sheets and shakes his head. "I can't do that."

"Yeah," Dazai says quietly and presses an apologetic kiss to the same spot he bit. "I know. Then... stop being an ungrateful brat. I'm still gonna fuck you, chibi. All in due time."

Chuuya's huff of annoyment is muffled. "I was about to say that I like this just as much, but you interrupted me!"

"So mean," he hears Dazai say theatrically as his breath ghosts over his rim, making him twitch. "Chuuya's always so mean when I'm so, so nice to him."

Chuuya wants to retort something about using his mouth to do more useful things than being a dramatic little bitch, but —

Well, there's no need for that anymore when Dazai does precisely that.

He sneaks his hand between Chuuya's thighs as well, although Chuuya finds himself surprised but not disappointed when his fingers slip past his cock to his balls, knowing just how sensitive Chuuya is there. For a few glorious minutes, Chuuya does nothing but float in the pool of warm, heady pleasure as Dazai works him into an orgasm.

It's different when Chuuya comes, tiny shocks of electricity buzzing all over him and making him squirm away from Dazai when the asshole doesn't stop licking him. "Break," he gasps out, reaching to tangle his fingers in Dazai's hair. "I — I need a little break."

Dazai looks obscenely good in the morning, dappled rays of sunshine gracing his face and strands of hair giving him a look of perfect chaos. So good, in fact, that Chuuya has to turn away and take a few deep breaths to get his brain finally working.

"Chuuya?" Great. Now Dazai sounds concerned. "Are you okay?"

"Huh?"

"You look uncomfortable."

"I'm just experiencing something," Chuuya mutters. "Give me a minute."

After Dazai grabs a towel lying on his nightstand, he lets himself flop down next to Chuuya, arching one brow. "That good, huh?"

"A solid eight."

"An eight only?"

"It's a decent grade," Chuuya argues, most of the mist in his head seeping out of him. "And we've had a lot of sex."

"So? We can fuck like tens all the time."

"That's not realistic. It can't be a ten every time."

"But if it's good --"

"It's against the rules."

Dazai looks incredibly amused as his mouth stretches into a wide grin. "Rules? Is there a grading-sex-committee that I haven't heard about,

chibi?"

"Shut up," Chuuya mutters, still trying to collect himself. “You know what I mean."

"I really do not. I have no idea what you mean."

Thank god, Chuuya's not going to have to put up with this idiot for much longer.

Except that the thought leaves him breathless.

"Whatever." Chuuya's eyes unconsciously fall to Dazai's dick, and he squirms again, desire and sensitivity fighting a confusing battle inside him. "Give me five minutes, and I'll be good to go." Then he looks back at Dazai, meeting his amused gaze. "Or, I could blow you."

"It's fine."

Chuuya throws one leg over him. “I could eat you out, too, you know."

Dazai stills. “Uh...”

Resting his chin on his interlaced fingers, Chuuya shrugs. “It doesn’t always have to be my ass that gets all the pampering. Unless you don’t want me to…?”

For someone that likes to think he is eloquent, Dazai has trouble finding words now.

Especially when he has the stupid urge to answer the question with *someday*. But he’s able to bite his tongue before that word slips out of him. “I haven’t really thought about it.”

Chuuya blinks at him. “Okay.”

“…”

“Are you thinking about it now?”

“No," Dazai says slowly. "Should I?”

“Why are you asking me? I mean, if you’re not into it, it’s fine. I get that. Have you ever tried, though?”

“Once. With Akiko.”

“Oh. Did you like it?”

The truth is that yes, he did like it, but the more complicated, extensive truth is that, at the time, every touch that wasn’t a harsh grasp around his neck or the feeling of blades cutting through skin felt good. It’s been a while since then, and Dazai would rather not spend the few hours he has left with Chuuya unpacking the emotional damage that forced masculinity has done to him.

“It was fine,” he finally replies as he rests his cheek against the palm of his hand to be able to look at Chuuya. “It’s just... I...”

Wow. Stumbling over his words like a nervous teenager. So much for being eloquent.

“A lot?” Chuuya guesses, repeating Dazai's own words from last night to him. He nods. “It’s fine. We don’t have to. But if you ever decide otherwise…” Chuuya trails off, catching his mistake.

So Dazai isn’t the only one struggling to accept the truth.

Maybe it’s a sign.

Maybe it’s just naïve hope.

“We should talk about it,” Dazai points out because someone has to.

Chuuya swallows. “Yeah, we probably should.”

Dazai glances down at himself, then back up at Chuuya. “Want to do it later? After I fuck you?”

“Yeah,” Chuuya agrees, already climbing on him, “let’s do that.”

How funny that all of a sudden, they seem to agree on things. How convenient.

Between kisses and a bit of grinding, Dazai manages to ask, “Can you be on top with your ankle?”

Chuuya bites his lip as he considers the situation. “I doubt it. I mean, yeah, but it would probably put some strain o—ah!”

“What about this then?” Chuuya’s on the back now, and Dazai is cupping the back of his ass to hold him a few inches above the bed, just perfect for pushing his cock inside his tight heat in one go.

Chuuya keens and curls his fists in the bedsheets. “Y-yeah, that — works!”

“Then like this,” Dazai decides and starts fucking him in a merciless rhythm that leaves neither of them space to think about anything other than how good they feel around each other. “And like this,” he says before flipping Chuuya sideways. “And this,” he murmurs as he drapes himself over Chuuya and holds him until he can swallow every broken gasp and noise and curse word that slips out of him. Until Dazai's so full of him, he'll never be able to forget again.

They’re eating Belgian waffles with cream and strawberries when Dazai absently turns on his phone for the first time since last night, and it starts going off like someone has fucking died, the buzzing of new notifications endless.

“What the fuck is going on?” Chuuya demands, dropping his waffle back on the plate. “Did something happen?”

Across from him, Dazai stares at his phone, not even blinking as he looks or reads at whatever is happening on his screen.

“Dazai?”

“Uh,” Dazai says before offering his phone to him with a tight-lipped expression, “I think you will want to see this, love."

Chuuya’s heart races as he accepts it. A thousand awful scenarios run through his head.

Dazai’s father out of jail.

Something happened to Hayashi.

Or something happened at the bar while they were busy fucking. Or —

Not this, though.

Chuuya does not expect to see a picture on the screen. Of the two of them. Kissing.

And the headline:

Dazai Osamu's Secret Boyfriend Revealed After All!

There’s more text under the photograph — it was taken in the bar,

Chuuya realizes, when they were dancing and — and making out in front of everybody. Something about how everyone has been speculating about the boy Dazai had mentioned in his interview. Something about au pairs. And a bunch of info about Chuuya. That he doesn't remember ever giving out.

This —

But —

"Oh my god," Chuuya whispers. "My parents." He turns on his phone, and this time he isn't surprised to see the same amount of notifications blaring through the silence between them.

E-mails from magazines appear on his screen, asking for interviews and official statements.

Instagram posts. Hundreds of them.

Even texts from his old classmates.

And then — his parents.

In their family group chat, Paul has linked one of the articles that not only posted the kissing pictures from Lupin, but blurry pictures from — from the hotel lobby! Chuuya on Dazai's back, whispering something into Dazai's ear. They look happy, he thinks. Free. They weren't turned into a meme but into something much, much bigger.

Paul: Seems like you have a lot to tell us! Can't wait to have you back home ;)

Arthur: You are still coming home, honey. Right?

Chuuya locks his phone and puts it away, teetering on the edge of a nervous breakdown because they just got outed in front of the entire goddamn world.

Chuuya was already out to most people, but he did make it a point not to bother with strangers that he didn't know well. So he could have an option. That option doesn't exist anymore. And, well, Dazai...

Dazai lost that option when he was all but forced to go public with it.

Sometimes life works in mysteriously cruel ways.

"Is it bad?" Dazai asks.

“They’re making jokes about it,” Chuuya waves his concern off. “I’m not worried about them, but..." He shrugs. Words escape him.

"I'm so sorry, Chuuya." Dazai sounds so... so exhausted. "You should have never been involved in any of this."

Chuuya's scowl softens as he grabs Dazai's hand, squeezing it tightly. "It's not your fault. I'm not sure what to think about it yet, but, hey, no one forced us to be all over each other in public. We should have been more careful."

Last night, there was a no-phone rule so exclusive pictures of the bar's layout wouldn't get released earlier than planned. Only Ranpo's team had the rights to film footage, and Chuuya's sure Ranpo wouldn't have leaked that kind of information — about the two of them. The picture of them kissing is too blurry anyway. Someone must have sneaked in their phone.

“I can’t believe the world thinks we’re a couple when we haven’t even figured it out ourselves yet.” It’s supposed to be a joke, but it’s the opening line to a conversation they’ve been both trying to avoid.

Dazai cocks his head, a sad, small smile on his lips. “I guess we should finally talk about it then, huh?”

“Yeah,” Chuuya says, his laughter fading. “Yeah. We should.”

They look at each other in loaded silence.

It’s not that they have nothing to say — it’s the opposite. Too much to say. Too hard to bear.

“I guess I’ll start,” Chuuya volunteers, his tone not much more than a weak offer. Dazai gives him a nod, a silent *go on, love.* So he does. “I… god, where do I even begin?” Because here sits the person that makes Chuuya feel every color of the goddamn rainbow. Someone that has made him so happy all he wanted to do was shout into the sky. Someone who left him completely and utterly alone once. How is Chuuya supposed to put the complicated system of feelings inside him into words? How the fuck do you describe a volcano? A hurricane?

“I wish we could pretend a little longer,” he finally says. “Stay here in this hotel room and act like nothing before and nothing after exists. But we can’t. Because you’re staying, and I’m leaving. Because you lied, and it's hard for me to really trust you again. At least, not like before. Like someone should if they l— if they’re in a relationship

with someone.” His chest rises and falls. Chuuya shrugs weakly. “I don’t know. I feel like we’re good at this –” He motions between them. “Having fun together. Sex. Passion. All the extremes. Life isn’t all about extremes, though, right?”

Dazai gazes at him in silence.

“Your turn,” Chuuya adds — he pleads because every word out of his mouth feels *wrong*.

“I want to make you stay.” Dazai’s smile is — it’s soft. Chuuya has never seen that expression on him before. “I would pay every therapy and surgery bill there is, and if you didn't like that, I would pay anonymously and pretend your insurance can cover everything after all. It doesn’t matter, Chuuya, because I would find a way to make you stay.”

Chuuya huffs quietly. “You ass.”

“I love you,” Dazai replies, and these simple three words are enough of an explanation. “And I want to protect the people that I love. And that's why I'm not going to do any of this. Why I'm going to let you go. I'm not good for you. I love you, and I think you need to go home.”

“Don’t say that. You’re not bad for --”

“You said it yourself. I ruined you.”

“Yeah, I know what I said! So maybe you did a little. You made a mistake. That doesn’t mean that you’re not good enough or some bullshit like that. I just — it’s the trust thing.” Chuuya rubs his temple, eyes squeezing shut. If he could, he would forgive and forget. It would be the easier option. But Chuuya can’t. He can’t choose. He can’t dig inside his own skin and fix something invisible. “We’d need time,” he whispers and looks at Dazai, “that we don’t have. Be honest, Osamu. Do you really believe we could make a relationship work? Let alone, long-distance?”

“If we tried to.”

“But?” Because there always is one.

“You don’t trust me, and I would live on the other side of the world.”

Yeah.

Chuuya swallows.

“I'd be willing to give up on Lupin if it meant getting a shot at this,” Dazai admits, “but I don’t think that’s the solution.”

“You can’t give up on it. You worked too hard.”

“I know.”

"I don't want to be the reason you gave up on your plans. Imagine we don't work out anyway. You'd hate me."

"I could never hate you."

"Because you're not going to give up on Lupin."

"I know, Chuuya."

Dazai has to stay here, where he started building his business.

And Chuuya has to go home to start doing the same for himself.

There are two paths for each of them, and they don’t converge.

It feels strange to give up something so magical, so big and devastating, like love for something as dull as careers, distance, and things that never seem to matter. But it’s what all the romance novels and movies fail to mention. Sometimes it’s the simple things that make the hardest obstacles. Sometimes love by itself is not enough.

“So this is then, huh?” Dazai brushes their knuckles together. “Chuuya’s going home.”

Leaning forward, Chuuya buries his face in the crook of Dazai’s neck. A single tear drops into the empty space between them. “Yeah.”

“Hey." Dazai lifts his hand to cup his cheek, thumb brushing over his jaw as he makes Chuuya look at him, their forehead touching. “How about a deal?”

“A deal?”

"Three years. We give ourselves three years, and if we’re both still single by then and still willing to give it a shot, we try to make this work."

Chuuya laughs through the awful stinging in his eyes. “That’s a shitty

deal, Osamu. Time isn't going to fix anything."

"No, but three years could give us time to reconfigure ourselves. A clean slate, if you will. We'd meet as if we never even knew each other."

"Three years… you'll have been a bar owner for quite a while by then."

"Uh-uh. It wouldn't be like now. Being new to all this. I'd have more experience and be able to delegate more. Maybe open more bars. In other countries."

"And I'd be finishing my bachelor's degree."

"You would be."

"Maybe I'd reconsider studying abroad after all."

"You could do that. What did you settle on, by the way?"

Chuuya bites his lip. "Social services. I— I want to help other kids like me. Like Ryuu and Gin. Like you. I know people always shit on it, and the pay's supposed to suck, but fuck, I don't care. I want to do it. Even if I'm only going to change one life."

"Good for you, Nakahara Chuuya. Good for you." It doesn't sound condescending. It sounds genuine and honest, and —

"Three years," Chuuya repeats because holding onto a number and a possible future is more bearable than accepting defeat.

"Three years," Dazai echoes, knowing that this is just another lie to help him get up in the morning for the next while.

Three years.

A promise.

A maybe.

A *goodbye*.

Chuuya stands by his decision not to have Dazai drive him to the airport. He does. It doesn't need to be more painful than it already is. Neither does he want to deal with the headache that would haunt him

the entire flight because of all the ugly crying he'd be doing right now if it was Dazai standing here instead of Hayashi. Not only that, but there would be footage of Chuuya crying since the paparazzi seem to be obsessed with Dazai these days. (#FrenchKiss has been trending on Twitter for two consecutive days now.) Hayashi and Chuya barely managed to lose the car waiting in front of the house — and only because the family driver led them in the other direction. It's weird, but Chuuya isn't even that shocked by all the attention anymore. Then again, he's not going to be part of it any longer.

However, when they come to a stop in front of the security gates and Chuuya turns around, his heart still falls as he searches for someone that isn't going to come. The smile he presses out is a brittle thing.

Before any words can get out, Hayashi pulls him into a hug.

“You know that you’re always welcome here, right? No matter what time of year, Chuuya-kun. Give us one call, and our doors will be open for you.”

Nodding, Chuuya pulls away, wiping weakly at his eyes. He didn’t want to cry, fuck, but he feels strung out by the pain of leaving Yokohama behind, even after everything that's happened here. “I’ll take you up on that offer,” Chuuya finally replies.

“Someday.” Not any time soon. Too early, and too much. But maybe a few — *three* — years down the line. *Someday*.

“I’ll be waiting for your call then,” she says and pinches his cheek. “You have done so much for my family. It’s the least we can offer you in return.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

Hayashi smiles knowingly. “I think we both know that you did.”

It was Dazai who helped her see her marriage for what it was. It was Dazai who enabled her to get out before it was too late. It was all Dazai. What Chuuya did isn't worth mentioning.

“Tell the kids that I’ll miss them,” Chuuya says in a pathetic attempt to redirect the conversation.

“You already did, but I’ll remind them now and then,” she says with a wink. Then her expression softens. “Anything I should tell Osamu?”

Chuuya feels dizzy with how much there still is. And yet. “He already knows everything.”

Hayashi probably thinks that they will try out doing the long-distance thing. Everyone else probably does, too. No one knows that they promised each other a maybe. An uncertain future is all they have left.

"— This is the pre-boarding announcement for flight 89B to Paris —"

“It’s time,” Chuuya says with a stronger, more genuine smile this time.

“Be safe. Let me know as soon as you land, will you?”

“Of course.

Hayashi hugs him again. Chuuya tries not to cling to the last person from this city, this country, and this life here.

He turns one last time before going through the gates as if, by some miracle, he will spot Dazai running through the airport with a rose in his hand.

One last grand gesture.

But all he sees is Hayashi waving at him with a teary-eyed smile. Then the security guard is speaking to him, asking for his ticket and ID, and Chuuya has to face reality.

He wastes most of his time strolling through the duty-free shop and looking at overpriced candy that will numb the leeching feeling inside his breastbone. He buys a pack of M&Ms and sits down on one of the benches, watching airplanes come and go as he listens to his most depressing playlist yet.

Every time he spots someone tall, or someone in a coat, or someone dark-haired and beautiful passing by, his heart stutters. Whenever someone isn’t who he so desperately wishes it to be, his heart sinks deeper.

Chuuya goes through ten near-breakdowns before he finally lets himself fall into his plane seat, a stifling, hollow numbness replacing the sadness in his lungs.

Back when he first boarded the plane to Yokohama, he never believed he would end up feeling like *this* going home. His au pair year was always meant to be a temporary escape from his miserable reality in

Paris. Instead, he experienced the year of a lifetime.

He lived. With every breath he took here, he was alive, and even though it breaks his heart to leave so early, maybe… maybe he'll be all right. Maybe it will only go up from here.

The plane takes ages to prepare for take-off. By the time twenty long minutes have passed, the seat next to him is still empty. It's strange, considering the plane is relatively full.

A foolish whisper of hope claws its way into his brain. A silly *what if?* echoing through his head over and over again until Chuuya's buzzing with nerves.

The captain announces a slight delay because of one passenger, and it only makes things worse. When he hears the cabin crew welcome someone else on board, Chuuya's head whips around so quickly, he almost dislocates it. He wouldn't put it past Dazai to delay an entire flight to make a fucking point. What is Dazai, if not inherently dramatic?

The very next second, Chuuya wants to punch himself.

The last passenger is some old geezer with a bag, hurrying down the aisle to his seat — *next to Chuuya.* The flight attendants seal the door. Chuuya leans against his seat and closes his eyes, biting down on his teeth to stop himself from making any noises as warm, salty tears roll down his cheeks.

This is goodbye then.

To the city.

To all the friends he made.

To this side of life.

And to Dazai.

Dazai looks out of the window and into the sky, searching for a plane up there.

It's not the best view. Not the entirety of Yokohama's skyline in all its glory from fifteen floors above. But the stars are never what Dazai longed to reach. He doesn't want to fly. All he ever wanted was a stable ground beneath his feet, and this is it.

His little kingdom.

His bar.

His own creation, no matter what his father or the media might say, in a desperate attempt to ruin what he built here.

Yesterday's numbers were once again skyrocketing, just like the days before.

Dazai, of course, knew the tactical advantage of appealing to the masses and of stepping into the public with a truth that he didn't even dare to admit to himself for the majority of his life. But even with that in mind, Dazai never expected just how far it would reach. He can barely open the internet without seeing that goddamn picture of Chuuya and him at the opening party.

Another surprise.

He wishes Chuuya hadn't been dragged into the public spectacle that his life has become, but Dazai can't say that he dislikes the picture. It's real. It's proof that Chuuya was part of him, was *his,* even if only for one night.

The phone on his desk rings. Dazai closes the window and accepts it. The person on the other end of the line is his new secretary — one that asked Dazai for a job after his father stepped down as a chairman. "Yes?"

"Dazai-san. There's a delivery here. I'm going to store the packages in the storage room. Is that all right?"

"Leave one of them in the kitchen, would you?"

"Of course, Dazai-san. Baudelaire called to confirm the meeting next week. Wednesday. Twelve o'clock. Please, don't forget."

"How could I ever forget when I have you, Minori-kun?" Dazai chuckles quietly when he hears a flustered silence come from her end. It's nothing but a pitiful attempt to smother the feeling of loneliness — paralyzing, bottomless loneliness — that's starting to spread inside him. First, his stomach, then his lungs, and soon it will be everywhere. It has been a while since Dazai felt like that. Ten months, to be precise.

Minori pushes out a nervous laugh, probably because she thinks he is

actually in a relationship. He isn't. "I-I'll do my best," she stammers out. "The man was really insistent; said that it's of utmost importance."

"They always do." A heavy sigh leaves his body. "Is there anything else?"

"Oh, yes! Uh, your friends are waiting for you downstairs. Yosano Akiko and Ranpo Edogawa!"

Well, fuck, why didn't she start with that?

"Thanks, Minori-kun. See you tomorrow."

"Oh, but —"

"Tomorrow," Dazai says and hangs up.

Walking out of his office to receive his friends, he finds himself swallowing dread. They are his friends. They are here to support him. But seeing the pity on their faces —

Yosano giving him that little apologetic sigh.

Ranpo trying hard not to tell him what an idiot it is.

It makes today feel so much more real.

"I should have known that you two were only supportive of Lupin to steal all the liquor."

"Dazai-kun," Ranpo drawls, "I could buy Osaka and still be one of the richest people in Japan. I don't need to steal your liquor."

Akiko takes a sip of her drink. "No, you're right. I'm totally using you for free booze."

Letting out a breath, Dazai sits down at the bar between the two of them, where they left an open spot for him. How thoughtful. "So."

"So," Akiko echoes, squeezing his arm in a silent gesture of comfort. "How about a drinking game? First one who throws up loses."

Ranpo gives her a thumbs-up.

"I'll drink you fuckers under the table."

"I'd like to see you try, mister-168-centimeters."

"Height has nothing to do with alcohol tolerance. Oi, Dazai. Can you call Oda?"

"Hey, this was supposed to be a night just for the three of us. Like old times."

"Dazai and Oda are friends just fine."

"You just want to climb the man like a tree."

"So?"

Dazai quietly smiles to himself.

This is everything he ever wanted. Just why does he feel like he's missing part of his lungs?

Chapter End Notes

Only one more chapter to go :(I'm SAD

Chapter 31: This Side

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“We have to be quiet,” Chuuya gets out between fits of breathless giggling as they walk backwards into his room, half-stumbling and half-blind to his surroundings because all he can see is Dazai. Dazai in front of him, Dazai’s hand on his hips, Dazai grinning at him so genuinely and happily and purely.

Dazai here. In Paris. With Chuuya. “My dads —”

“— are not going to hear anything,” Dazai drawls, eyes glinting like diamonds before they somehow manage to land on the small bed, their limbs and arms tangling into one mess of two people. “We’re already experts at being quiet, love. Remember?”

Chuuya sighs lazily when Dazai’s warm mouth connects with the delicate skin on his neck. “As if I could ever forget.” Dazai’s warm chuckle ghosts over his collarbone. “In the bathroom. In the office. In your bed with all of your friends next door…”

“In a changing room at the mall.”

“In your bar.” Dazai’s breath tickles, and for a moment, Chuuya pauses, cupping his cheeks to take him in. Disheveled hair, rosy cheeks, and half-lidded, mars-brown eyes. So achingly familiar and pretty and now *his*. “You’re really here,” he whispers. "You came. You came for me."

It feels like a dream, but it’s not.

It’s real.

Dazai blinks up at him, blows a strand of hair out of his face before cocking his head. “What do you mean? You never left.”

"Hah?" Chuuya doesn’t understand, still too giddy with excitement. “What are you talking about? We made a promise, remember, but I still left?”

Dazai opens his mouth, but instead of a reply —

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

Chuuya falls out of sleep like slipping off a water slide without any bathing trunks: hard and fast. The remnants of his dream taste painfully bitter on his tongue as he slowly blinks up at the ceiling of his childhood bedroom in Paris, torn between cursing his damn alarm clock for ripping that fake scenario away from him, and cursing his subconscious for letting him dream of such things in the first place.

His alarm clock beeps again, and with an annoyed grunt, Chuuya rolls over to turn it off, along with the other twenty alarms. Now that he doesn't have to wake up at the ass crack of dawn anymore — at least, not until his classes start in one month — Chuuya would have thought, he could finally wake up feeling *rested*. Apparently, it doesn't matter how many hours he sleeps, though. Mornings will always be hard.

He wastes another fifteen minutes mindlessly scrolling through various social media apps before finally getting up to take a piss and brush his teeth. Outside his room, he can hear his fathers discussing dinner plans in the kitchen. The smell of freshly-bought croissants and vanilla linger in the air. Chuuya can't help but think of the dream again.

The dream that he's had every night since he came back home a month ago.

The dream of Dazai. Of kissing Dazai. Of touching Dazai. Of just... being with Dazai.

The first week was hard. Coming home after a year like that in Yokohama to his life without a single real friend in sight felt like getting sucker-punched by reality. Chuuya spent most of that time in bed, either looking at pictures for the 189th time or going through his chat with Dazai over and over.

But it did get better. The longing didn't exactly go away, but it paled, still pales with each day, replaced by summer-bright, colorful excitement about the new chapter in his life: starting college, meeting new people, and even more opportunities. Excitement about his future. So, all things considered, Chuuya would say that he's been dealing with it pretty well.

But the dreams.

The dreams turn his mornings into a nightmare.

Every time, it feels like waking up and realizing that Chuuya isn't going to see Dazai again for a very, very long time all over again.

Sure, they text now and then, but it's not the same. And sure, they made each other a promise, but who knows what their lives will look like in three goddamn years. Chuuya might meet someone in that time. Dazai might. Because it's not fair to expect the other to put his life on pause while they bide their time, no matter how much love still clung between them in that hotel room. In the end, it was a promise to make saying goodbye easier. That's it. And having the same realization every morning — it still hurts just as much as the day they last saw each other.

It's safe to say that when Chuuya shows up in the kitchen, it's with a grumpy scowl etched into his features. "Morning."

"Morning, sleeping beauty," Arthur greets him from the stove.

"Good morning, Chuuya," Paul says as he reads the morning news — the last possible fossil on earth to still do this in the age of technology. "Sleep well?"

Chuuya has not told them about the dreams, or pretty much anything about Dazai, for that matter. Given that the picture of the two of them kissing went viral for several weeks on end and still gets dragged up every time Dazai's in the news — so *every damn day* because of the upcoming trial — it was hard to deny his fathers' suspicions about him and Dazai and their relationship that went a bit further than being host-brothers. But Chuuya's back in Paris, and Dazai's on the other side of the world in Yokohama. It doesn't take too much thinking to figure out what must have happened.

"Like a baby," Chuuya lies, grabbing butter from the fridge and a knife from one of the drawers, forcing Arthur to scoot over.

"Any plans for today?"

Taking a nap. Spending more time on his phone doing absolutely nothing. Taking Baki out for a walk.

"Uh," Chuuya sits down and grabs one of the croissants. "Clean my room?"

"Physical therapy?" Arthur suggests gently.

Ah, right. That.

"Yeah."

“I’m serious, honey. We didn’t take the condition seriously enough the first time. You can’t let this happen again.”

“I know,” Chuuya says.

“It’s hard, but you have to take care of yourself. You —”

“Dad,” Chuuya shoots him a smile. “I'm going, all right?"

Physical therapy took some... adjusting. The man he worked with was a sweet guy, painfully patient except that Chuuya didn't want to be coddled — he needed to get better. He pushed. The guy told him to slow down. Chuuya might have said a few borderline insulting things and his therapist might have demanded that Chuuya would need to find someone else with that attitude of his.

Oh, well.

Now he's working with someone new. An older lady named Emile who, despite her petite stature, is fucking ruthless. Chuuya's very fond of her.

His parents apparently still think that he's fighting treatment when he's not. He goes to physical therapy. He massages his leg every night. He wears that damn leg boot. He makes sure not to put too much strain on it.

He's trying. He really is.

"I don’t want to spend the rest of my life in pain if I can help it, okay?" Chuuya adds. "I want to get better, too.”

“Oh,” Arthur says, then dramatically clutches his hand to his chest. “You sound so grown up.”

Chuuya can only make a grunting noise because of his father’s dramatics.

"You really do,” Paul murmurs and takes a sip of his coffee to hide a proud smile.

Chuuya rolls his eyes, but his cheeks feel warm. Baby steps.

He eats breakfast, skimming some of the latest articles about Dazai.

A successful theme night in Lupin.

Spotted downtown with Ranpo.

New interview.

Spotted at the airport.

New Instagram post.

Someday, Chuuya thinks, he will stop googling Dazai's name and torturing himself, but for now, it's one of the easiest ways to feel like he's still part of that life somehow, to know what's happening on the other side of the world.

In the first two weeks back here, Chuuya sometimes sent screenshots of articles to Dazai, desperately trying to fill that hole inside him, even if it was just by texting but... somewhere along the way, Dazai's replies got more scarce. Shorter. Chuuya knows he's busy, obviously. He guesses he just thought it would take them a little longer than a single month to drift apart.

He wastes half of his morning playing video games, does an ab work out, checks out the fridge twenty times, and lies around on the couch, reading the group chat for the social services first years and trying to gauge whether he'll find some decent people to hang out with once classes start. There's some dude named Shirase who keeps sending memes and while it's slightly excessive and annoying, Chuuya can't help but snort out loud every time. Around lunch, Baki starts bothering him about her walk by tugging on his socks and threatening to slobber all over his naked feet if he doesn't comply, so Chuuya slips into the first sneakers he finds, puts on his earphones, and leaves the apartment, humming along to Sum 41's *With Me*.

Outside the building complex, Chuuya lets Baki sniff at a bush. A cab rolls into the street. One of his neighbors passes by, a guy his age that went to the same school as him and who completely ignores Chuuya. Wonderful. But maybe good because Baki tries to sit down.

"No, no," Chuuya mutters, trying to stop her, "you can't poop here, Baki. It's..." Out of the corner of his vision, he sees the door of the cab swing open, and —

He freezes.

Baki looks in the same direction and barks.

Chuuya's heart jumps.

The man that climbs out of the car is —

Dazai.

That's *Dazai.*

Chuuya blinks because there is no way but… it is. It's him.

Dazai's head tilts. He smiles.

It takes Chuuya a few seconds to move, thoughts spiraling into an endless echo of *this is a dream, this is just another stupid dream, stop dreaming and wake the fuck up*, but no matter how much he wills himself to wake up, he doesn't. Because it's not a dream. Because Dazai's here. Only a few feet away from him.

The leash slips out of Chuuya's hand, and he takes off at a running speed, running into already-opened arms and throwing himself around Dazai's neck. This time, he catches Chuuya. He catches Chuuya and pulls him into his chest, closer, as close as humanly possible, with a muffled and breathless laugh.

They cling to each other, but Chuuya wants — he *needs* more, pressing his face into Dazai's neck, inhaling his familiar scent and that stupid cologne he loves so much, feeling Dazai's hands pull him even tighter, tucking him so close Chuuya feels like they might simply become one person.

"Hey, Chuuya," Dazai whispers after what feels like both a lifetime and a single second.

And that voice —

Chuuya glances up, grabbing his shoulder. "Dazai — what are you — how —"

But Dazai just keeps grinning goofily at him. *"Hi."*

"Hi!" Chuuya exclaims, and then despite every nerve in his body telling him not to, he steps back, so confused, and punches Dazai in the chest. Half-heartedly. "Dazai! What the fuck are you doing here?!"

"Duh, I'm here to see you."

"But —" It's what he has been dreaming of every damn night, what he

wanted to hear when he kept turning around at the airport and looking for one person only, what he hoped for when the plane took off, but — it doesn't make any goddamn sense. “What about our promise? We said —”

Dazai lets out a breath, driving a hand through his hair. "I know what we said, but I tried. I really did. It didn't work, so I decided to screw the three years."

Chuuya's laughter is too high and throaty. "You... you decided it didn't work?"

"Yeah."

"Just like that?"

"Yeah."

"Dazai!"

"God, I missed you," the idiot murmurs and cups his face, completely ignoring the incredulous tone in Chuuya's voice. “I missed hearing you yell at me. Please, do it again.”

Chuuya wraps his fingers around Dazai's wrist, squeezing lightly as he stares at him. "Dazai, you worked so hard. You can't throw all of that away just because it's been a bit rough." Dazai sacrificed so much to get where he is now. He even Chuuya to get here. And now... “You can't."

“Oh, that. I'm not throwing anything away.”

Chuuya blinks furiously. “Huh?"

“I got a very lucrative offer to open another *Lupin* here. In Paris.”

“What?” he asks to make sure he heard right.

Dazai nods as if knowing exactly what's going through his mind. If he opens a bar here… he'd have to be here half the time. In Paris. Where Chuuya lives.

“I'm here to discuss details, but by the end of the week, I will be able to sign a contract.” Dazai shrugs innocently. “I'm also here to look at apartments. You know, because managing my business here will be easier if I actually live here, too. 60% of the time anyway.”

Chuuya can't help it. He bursts out laughing. Baki, who has come to stand between the two of them, looks at him like he's gone crazy before head-butting his leg. Maybe he has. Only people who have gone insane get so damn lucky, right? It just can't be real.

Dazai cups his cheek, his thumb flicking his nose. "Why is Chuuya laughing?"

"Because," he says, half-giggling, half-shaking his head. "I could have spared myself the most miserable month of my life if you had gotten this offer earlier. Or, even year."

He hears Dazai chuckle, and when Chuuya finally collects himself enough to look at Dazai and properly take in that healthy flush on his cheek and the bright light in his eyes, everything in Chuuya blooms alive.

"Who knows, maybe I just did it for the dramatic entrance," Dazai drawls and gives him the worst wink of his life.

It tugs at Chuuya's heart strings anyways, and his face slowly starts to hurt from the constant strain of grinning so damn hard. "So..."

"So," Dazai echoes with a knowing glint, "Nakahara Chuuya, are you in, or are you out?"

"In for what?" Chuuya snaps jokingly. He needs to hear it. He needs the actual words to know that this isn't just a subtle way of asking them to rekindle their friends with benefits relationships whenever Dazai is here. That this isn't some kind of game. He needs to know that this is the real thing. "I thought you weren't good enough for me?"

"I'm not," Dazai replies honestly, "or, at least, I don't think I am, but I'd like to try anyway. I'd like to work on it. On the trust thing. On everything."

Chuuya bites his lip.

Dazai stretches out his hand and offers it to him. "Do you want to give it a shot?"

Considering how many months Chuuya spent fighting it, it should probably take him longer to think about what he's going to say, or let alone do with this question, but it doesn't. The answer is clear this time. It has always been. And it doesn't mean that everything's suddenly forgotten, but it is as Dazai said: they can work on it because

now they *can*. Because Dazai's here, and he's not leaving. Not anymore.

“Yeah,” Chuuya breathes out and accepts his hand, intertwining their fingers until they’re pressed together. “There’s nothing that I would like more than this."

Dazai tugs him closer with that hand, right into his chest, and with his other one, he grips Chuuya’s chin and leans down to kiss him.

A warmth that has nothing to do with body heat spreads through Chuuya in giant, gentle waves, like the sun itself is stuck inside his chest, filling every empty corner and hole until he’s full of it. So full of love he could burst.

Chuuya’s smile is so wide, he can’t even properly kiss Dazai back. When he sees the same expression mirrored on Dazai’s face, he has to grin even harder, holding onto his *boyfriend’s* coat, so he won’t accidentally trip over his feet.

“Hi,” he murmurs eventually, their lips brushing because they can’t get it together to kiss right now, but that doesn’t mean either of them is willing to step back. “I missed you.”

“I missed you, too. No, actually, I was miserable,” Dazai tells him seriously. “I think I would have gone insane if we had actually waited three years. Please let’s not ever make that kind of promise again.”

Chuuya huffs out a hoarse laugh. “Like you would have waited that long, asshole.”

“I would.” Dazai’s fingers on his waist flex and pull him closer again with a sigh. “I swear I would have waited a thousand years.”

Chuuya’s eyes flutter open to a gentle darkness draped over his room. He reaches for the body next to him and slips out of the hazy lull of sleep when he only finds empty space. A glance at his too damn bright phone reveals that it’s nearly four in the morning. Chuuya yawns.

He waits a few minutes before getting up to find Dazai. He knows that sleep doesn’t come easy to him, not ever, but especially not in a bed that’s too fucking small to share with someone as tall as him and especially not in a different timezone that contradicts his inner clock. So it’s not like Chuuya can’t just go back to sleep without Dazai. His boyfriend. Partner. Best friend. But now that he can fall asleep next to

him, Chuuya refuses to do it without him, and if that makes him clingy, then so be it. He's clingy. Whatever.

(And, maybe, that part of him that got so badly hurt back then, that part that's still not entirely stitched back together and perhaps never will be again, is somewhat paranoid.)

Chuuya puts on a shirt that he finds on the floor — too large, too long, and therefore not his — and tiptoes out of his room, following the faint glow of the light that comes from the kitchen where he finds Dazai, nibbling on a piece of baguette. Chuuya can't resist the temptation to say, "So you are the nanny."

Because *this* is how everything starte. How their first-ever conversation went. Sparks were flying, that's for sure, just not the ones that are flying right now when Dazai glances up at him, and his mouth twitches at the corner.

It's barely a grin, but Dazai's eyes seem bright with smiles, even when the night outside is dark and heavy. "And what if I am?" he asks, voice soft like the caress of lips against skin. Chuuya shivers. "I have to look after this french kid. Tiny, but with an attitude the size of Jupiter. Seem familiar to you?"

Chuuya scowls jokingly as he steps between Dazai's thighs, sighing when two arms wrap around him, pull him into a warm, solid chest. "Be careful what you say before I kick you out, asshole."

"Chuuya wouldn't do that."

No, probably not. Chuuya loves him too much.

He does.

He loves him.

His fathers' opinions on Dazai are… let's say, a bit complicated. Yes, Chuuya never told them about all the messed up things that happened but they're also not stupid. And having Dazai show up here all of a sudden, get the boyfriend title and basically invite himself for a week-long sleepover… well, it came as a surprise. For everyone. Still, his fathers are polite and would never refuse to open their home to Dazai.

"You couldn't sleep?" he asks, craning his neck up to look at Dazai.

"I'm awake at this time. My body is confused."

“Yeah, that’s how I felt,” Chuuya grumbles against his chest, though he can’t help but smile when Dazai’s hand slips under his shirt and strokes his back, drawing invisible patterns into his skin, “and you had the audacity of saying I was *ravaging* the kitchen.”

"Yeah, well, I just wanted to rile you up back then. You always get this cute scowl.” He pinches Chuuya’s nose, making him glare half-heartedly before a yawn ruins the moment. “Yeah, just like this one. I’m sorry, but I’m in love with it. Can’t help myself.”

“Really?” Chuuya finds himself asking. “We didn't even know each other back then.”

It’s hard to imagine that Dazai already thought such things on that very first night, even harder to imagine when Dazai’s words echo through his mind again.

I was bored. It was all just a game.

Chuuya clings tighter to him.

These moments of doubts come and go, but when they do, they always leave a lingering mark that he can’t shake no matter what. The doubt that this is still a game. That this isn’t real even though it is.

Maybe Dazai notices the thoughts running through his mind — from the get-go, he has always been so good at reading Chuuya — because he leans down and cups his face with both of his hands. “I love you.”

The words make Chuuya’s head spin as he blinks up at Dazai. “Really?”

“So much,” Dazai says, thumbs stroking his skin. "I never even knew I could do that. Love someone this hard. But hey, Chuuya's an excellent teacher."

Chuuya’s heart flutters like a butterfly inside his chest, one that wants to explore the entire world with a desperate urge. He opens his mouth. He wants to say the words; they’re there on the tip of his tongue… but again, that lingering doubt makes him stop.

Dazai told him he’ll wait as long as he needs to hear the words. Chuuya wants to believe it. He does, so he nods, loops his arms around Dazai's neck, and hopes that the kiss he presses against Dazai’s lips is enough for now.

I love you, too.

Because this is just the beginning of their relationship. The beginning of a new chapter. And the beginning of something so much bigger than both of them ever dared to dream of.

It's the beginning of this side of paradise.

— THE END

Chapter End Notes

> After 150k+ words and way too many months, we have finally arrived at the end of this fic! Thank you to everyone who read every update, suffered through the angst lmao, and left kudos, comments, and bookmarks. I hope you guys enjoyed it as much as I enjoyed writing it <3 If you still feel like reading more about TSOP skk and their journey, feel free to check out the other fic(s) in this series. I'm also working on an Epilogue oneshot (that may or may not contain Chuuya's first 'I love you') that I will hopefully finish writing soon. So if you're interested, keep an eye out for that. Otherwise, thank you so much for reading. It's been real y'all <3

End Notes

You can find me on twitter! If you want to see my WIPs and fics (and a sprinkle of art) earlier, you can follow me there! Other than that, feedback and comments fuel the inspiration tank inside me. So fuck up that comment section if you want to. Or not.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!